

A close-up portrait of President Hassan Rouhani of Iran. He is wearing a white turban and glasses, with a grey beard. He is looking slightly to the right. The background is a solid teal color. A portion of a gold-framed picture is visible behind him on the left. A microphone is visible in the bottom right corner.

IRAN IN THE WORLD

President Rouhani's Foreign Policy

Edited by
SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
& DARA CONDUIT



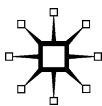
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CHAPTER 1

Rouhani's First Two Years in Office: Opportunities and Risks in Contemporary Iran

Shahram Akbarzadeh & Dara Conduit

President Hassan Rouhani surprised onlookers in June 2013 by winning the first round of the Iranian presidential election outright. Rouhani had campaigned on a platform of moderation, promising to form a “government of prudence and hope,” and raising expectations of an imminent shift in Iran’s international engagement.¹ On the campaign trail, Rouhani broke a number of political taboos. He criticized media censorship in a live television interview, questioned the need for heavy-handed state security, and declared that the 2009 postelection protests were “natural and popular.”² These statements were seen as potentially significant given that the two reformist candidates from the 2009 election (Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi) remained under house arrest, accused of carrying out a foreign plot against the Islamic regime.

On a symbolic level, Rouhani’s election represented more than a changing of the guards, because the polls came at a time of considerable domestic and regional crisis. Iran’s failure to resolve the nuclear dispute with the international community left Iran facing debilitating economic sanctions that were crippling the economy. Meanwhile, Iran was involved in a war in Syria to prop up its long-term ally, Bashar al-Assad, and facing increased sectarian animosity across the region. In the context of these challenges, Rouhani put forward a compelling argument for change, and as the only reformist candidate to run on the day of the 2013 poll, these policies stood him in stark contrast to his

competitors.³ Rouhani's electoral success could therefore only be seen as a strong mandate that reflected a popular desire for change.

Many questions have emerged during Rouhani's first term. Has Iran's new president created meaningful foreign policy change? Can Rouhani achieve a lasting rapprochement with the United States? Does Rouhani's experience of the presidency add greater depth to our understanding of Iranian foreign policymaking? And indeed, are presidents able to initiate meaningful foreign policy change in Iran? This volume addresses these questions by looking at Rouhani's foreign policy toward Iran's neighbors, as well as the high-profile Iran-US relationship. At the time of writing, Rouhani had been in office for only two years, but these were tumultuous years, rich in challenges and possibilities. Rouhani's record to date has been checkered, and therefore offers a revealing display of the strengths and limitations of the powers wielded by the incumbent president.

A Historic Opportunity for Change

Rouhani came to power at a key moment in Iranian history. The previous Iranian administration had been characterized by its tough stance on Israel and the United States, and inflexibility on the nuclear issue. President Ahmadinejad's provocative style had brought Iran to the brink of catastrophe. On more than one occasion, Washington or Tel Aviv threatened military intervention, while economic sanctions and fiscal mismanagement reaped havoc on the oil-rich Iranian economy. On the eve of the 2013 presidential election, annual inflation sat at 44 percent, while conservative estimates put youth unemployment above 25 percent.⁴ Furthermore, Ahmadinejad's disputed re-election in 2009 had undermined the legitimacy of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. The subsequent demonstrations rocked the very foundation of the Islamic Republic—at the height of the protests, known as the “Green movement,” three million people had taken to the streets of Tehran.⁵ By 2013, therefore, frustration in Iran was palpable, especially among the country's burgeoning youth.

Hassan Rouhani came to office at a time when Iran's regional reach had expanded quite unexpectedly. In spite of Ahmadinejad's brash style, which had seriously damaged the country's international image, Iran had re-emerged as a regional power. The 2001 US intervention in Afghanistan saw Iran provide crucial support to the United States

by providing permission for search and rescue missions. At the first international donor conference on Afghan reconstruction in Tokyo in 2002, Iran pledged US\$560 million over five years, becoming one of the largest and most influential donors.⁶ The 2003 US invasion of Iraq represented another opportunity for Iran. Iraq's President Saddam Hussein had long been a thorn in Iran's side. The US decision to overthrow Saddam and back Iraq's Shi'a was music to Iran's ears. Iran, with obvious justification, expected the post-Saddam government to be friendly.

However, the spread of the Arab Spring in 2011 proved a mixed blessing for Iran. Iran had loudly touted its revolutionary credentials as the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes fell in North Africa, but was silent when the uprising spread to Syria. The Syrian regime had become Iran's firmest ally in the wake of the 1979 revolution, so the collapse of the Assad dynasty would have dealt a considerable geopolitical blow to Iran. It would also have brought into question the viability of Hezbollah and Hamas. As a result, Iran became quietly embroiled in the Syrian conflict, and by the time Rouhani came to office, Iran was well and truly entrenched in the Syrian civil war. This involvement pitted Iran against its long-term rival, Saudi Arabia, who interpreted Tehran's role in Syria as a bold maneuver to seize regional hegemony and was committed to countering it. As a result, while Iran's influence on select states was at an all-time high on the eve of Rouhani's election, tensions and skepticism of Iran's intentions made it more isolated in the region than ever before.

Rouhani was widely hailed as a Reformist that could improve Iran's international position. As the former chief Iranian nuclear negotiator, he enjoyed a high profile on the international stage. Rouhani had garnered respect for his conduct in the role—the former-British Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, described him as “warm and engaging . . . a strong Iranian patriot [who] was tough but fair to deal with and always on top of his brief.”⁷ Straw added that, “Rouhani was plainly anxious to bring about a settlement of the long-running conflict between Iran and the West.”⁸ The same year, Rouhani broke ranks with his colleagues by thanking the United States for the humanitarian aid it provided after the disastrous Bam earthquake.⁹ This marked a sharp divergence from the “Great Satan” moniker that dominated the official Iranian discourse on the United States at the time. Likewise, while Rouhani was educated in Qom alongside much of the Iranian political and religious elite, he also studied abroad, receiving a Master's

degree in Public Law and a PhD from the secular Glasgow Caledonian University in the UK.¹⁰

However, for all of Rouhani's moderation, it would be naïve to expect that he would fundamentally undermine the Iranian theocratic system. Rouhani is a "regime insider," deeply embedded in the Iranian political system. Rouhani was a key opponent of the Shah, having spent time with Ayatollah Khomeini and former President Hashemi Rafsanjani while they were in exile in Paris before the 1979 revolution. He had been forced to flee Iran himself in 1977 after declaring that Khomeini was an Imam.¹¹ Rouhani also played an important role in the Islamic state's first decade. During the Iran-Iraq war, he commanded Iran's air defenses, and in 1986, led the Iran–Contra negotiations between Iran and the United States as Deputy Speaker of the parliament.¹² Rouhani served on the Supreme National Security Council between 1989 and 2005, and became a member of the Expediency Council in 1997 and the Assembly of Experts in 1999.¹³ These credentials make Rouhani a clear insider with extensive knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of the regime, and an unquestionable commitment to its survival. Simultaneously, these qualities make Rouhani uniquely placed to embark on rejuvenating the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Goals, Opportunities, and Challenges

The combination of Rouhani's significant political credentials, international reputation, and the scale of his popular mandate endowed him with considerable political capital. Rouhani himself hailed his win as "a victory for wisdom, moderation and maturity . . . over extremism."¹⁴ Early in his Presidency, Rouhani even appeared to enjoy the support of Khamenei, who argued that the time had come for Iran to exercise "heroic flexibility" in foreign policy.¹⁵

Rouhani set out an ambitious plan for foreign policy reform in the lead-up to the election that was defined by three inter-related themes: rebuilding the economy, resolving the nuclear issue, and ending Iran's international isolation. A paper penned in June 2014 by Iran's Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, in *Foreign Affairs* magazine confirmed these objectives, and in many ways read as a foreign policy manifesto for Iran's new government. It was quite clear that Rouhani and Zarif sought to improve Iran's economy and fix its international relations with a broader goal in mind: Reinstating Iran to its historic position on the world stage. Indeed, Zarif referred to Iran as a regional

“power” no fewer than four times in his landmark *Foreign Affairs* article, noting that “it is imperative for other states to accept the reality of Iran’s prominent role in the Middle East and beyond and to recognize and respect Iran’s legitimate national rights, interests, and security concerns.”¹⁶

Economic Recovery

Rebuilding the Iranian economy was Rouhani’s top priority. This would require not only dismantling international sanctions but also countering Iran’s reputation as an international pariah. Rouhani indicated the scale of these ambitions in a speech to the World Economic Forum in February 2014, proclaiming that: “Iran’s economy has the potential to be among the world’s top ten in the next three decades.”¹⁷ Many of Rouhani’s first moves as President were an extension of this push to rebuild the economy. He advocated opening Iran’s economy internationally, which he promised “doesn’t mean letting go of the nation’s ideals and principles.”¹⁸ He also counseled against past mistakes, which he perceived had led to a situation whereby the economy “pays for the politics . . . It would be good for once to act in reverse and have internal politics and foreign policy pay for the economy.”¹⁹ For Rouhani, foreign policy reform was a precondition for Iran’s economic recovery.

Rouhani was able to show tentative success in rehabilitating the economy. His international credibility and willingness to compromise on the nuclear issue led to a softening of international sanctions within months of coming to office. The IMF expected the Iranian economy to expand by 2.2 percent in 2015, a significant improvement after two years of recession in 2012 and 2013.²⁰ This was boosted by Iran’s automotive industry; car production increased by 53 percent between 2013 and 2014.²¹ By February 2015, Rouhani proudly announced that “we were able to bring down inflation from 40 percent to well below 16 percent . . . Iranian and foreign experts say what the government has done is more like a miracle from the economic viewpoint.”²² This was no small achievement given that the global oil price contracted sharply in the same period.

Rouhani’s electoral victory and his civil approach to the international community were welcomed by some international investors. India signed a memorandum of understanding on the Chabahar Port project in May 2015, despite US warnings against making deals with Iran in haste.²³ The project had been held up for more than

a decade because of international sanctions and represented a major achievement for Rouhani. As part of the deal, India has committed US\$85 million to set up a container terminal and multipurpose berth at Chabahar and a further US\$22.9 million annually for operating expenses.²⁴ India will also build a railway line between Chabahar and the Iranian city of Milak, which will significantly expand the volume of Afghan and Central Asian products transiting Iran. In March 2014, Rouhani also signed a US\$60 billion, 25-year deal for the supply of Iranian gas to Oman.²⁵ Although returning Iran to its former prosperity will also require major domestic reform—especially in targeting corruption—it is clear that Rouhani’s new foreign policy approach was able to relieve some pressure on the Iranian economy. However significant, these achievements remain tentative and reversible. President Rouhani is aware that full economic recovery is reliant on major restructuring of Iran’s foreign policy to end its international isolation. The gains made to date are revealing indicators of the potential for change in Iran and the significant benefits entailed in shedding its international pariah status.

Nuclear Issue

Iran’s nuclear ambitions and the question of a clandestine nuclear weapons program have been at the heart of the dispute between Iran and the international community. The string of international sanctions used by the United Nations, the United States, and the international community to enforce compliance proved unbearable for the Iranian economy, given its reliance on oil export revenue. Consequently, resolving the nuclear issue has been the centerpiece of Rouhani’s agenda. During the election campaign, Rouhani told a television audience that, “you should know the nuclear issue and the sanctions will also be resolved, and economic prosperity will also be created.”²⁶ He was later filmed in a campaign documentary saying, “it is good for centrifuges to operate, but it is also important that the country operates as well and the wheels of industry are turning.”²⁷ Upon election, Rouhani quickly moved to quash the nuclear issue, resuming negotiations and committing Iran to the interim agreement in November 2013. After attaining sanctions’ relief alongside the agreement, Rouhani even received a rare showing of support from Khamenei, who wrote an open letter to Rouhani, sending his “gratitude to the negotiating team and other officials” and proclaiming that “divine blessings and the prayers

and the support of the Iranian nation have brought about this achievement.”²⁸ Zarif went so far as to suggest that nuclear weapons were “detrimental to the country’s security and to its regional role.”²⁹

The nuclear issue became the ultimate test for Rouhani’s presidency. The July 2015 nuclear deal was therefore greeted with jubilation by his supporters, and quickly endowed Rouhani with reputation of the man who could change the course of history.

International and Regional Re-engagement

President Rouhani’s efforts to rewrite Iran’s foreign policy and bring Iran out of isolation were comprehensive and included the normalization of Iran’s external relations at the international and regional levels. Rouhani pledged to rebuild relations with countries near and far, with Iran–US relationship as his top priority. During his election campaign, Rouhani had said that, “the relationship between Iran and the United States is a complicated and difficult question. There is a chronic wound, which is difficult to heal. However, it is not impossible provided there is goodwill and mutual respect between the two countries.”³⁰ He also told *Asharq al-Awsat*, the London-based Arabic language newspaper with a predominantly Arab audience:

It seems that extremists on both sides are determined to maintain the state of hostility and hatred between the two states, but logic says that there should be a change of direction in order to turn a new page in this unstable relationship and minimize the state of hostility and mistrust between the two countries.³¹

Rouhani quickly put this pledge into action. Within two months of inauguration, Rouhani had held a historic phone call with US President Barack Obama, becoming the first Iranian and US presidents to speak directly since the Iranian revolution in 1979.³² Over the following two years, Rouhani and Obama fomented an unprecedented thaw in US–Iran relations, leading to a resolution of the nuclear issue and a significant improvement in Iran’s international reputation. Iran began welcoming Western dignitaries to Tehran—in March 2014, the EU’s foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton became the first EU official to visit Iran since 2008.³³ In April the following year, the Australian Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, became the second Western political leader to have visited Iran in a decade.³⁴ It is difficult to overstate the significance of this shift.

Rouhani also reached out to Iran's neighbors in an effort to rebuild trust in the region. He told the World Economic Forum that "we intend to re-open trade with all our neighbors . . . and begin cooperation."³⁵ Rouhani was quick to extend a hand to his neighbors, although the historically frosty Iran–Saudi relationship proved difficult to improve. However, many of Iran's Gulf neighbors seemed open to rebuilding ties, with Oman's Sultan Qaboos visiting Iran in the first month of Rouhani's presidency. In doing this, Qaboos' message was loud and clear: The future of the Iran–Oman relationship would be bright on Rouhani's watch.³⁶ Likewise, Rouhani appeared open to engaging on Iran's historic territorial disputes with the UAE, including the status of the islands of Abu Musa and the two Tunbs. In late 2013, Foreign Minister Zarif toured the Gulf states with a view to improving Iran's relationships with its neighbors.³⁷ Before embarking on the trip, Zarif wrote an op-ed in *Asharq al-Awsat* titled, "Our Neighbors are our Priority," announcing that Iran "recognize[s] that we cannot promote our interests at the expense of others. This is particularly the case in relation to counterparts so close to us that their security and stability are intertwined with ours."³⁸ He added that,

Iran, content with its size, geography, and human and natural resources, and enjoying common bonds of religion, history and culture with its neighbors, has not attacked anyone in nearly three centuries. We extend our hand in friendship and Islamic solidarity to our neighbors, assuring them that they can count on us as a reliable partner.³⁹

Rouhani and Zarif quickly undertook a charm offensive across the region, visiting neighbors, discussing friendship, and presenting Iran as the region's elder statesman. The Iranian Ambassador to Azerbaijan, Mohsen Pak Ayeen, implied Iran's willingness to again negotiate a settlement of the long-running Nagorno–Karabagh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, stating that the conflict has the potential to be resolved "using the regional capabilities."⁴⁰ This outreach was often complimented by soft power initiatives, especially through the country's extensive regional network of charitable trusts (*bonyads*).

Barriers to Success: Rouhani's Outreach amid Internal and External Challenges

Rouhani came to power with clear foreign policy goals, and while he began his presidency on firm footing, he faced enormous obstacles.

The international arena has presented a number of challenges: the deteriorating situation in Syria, increased sectarian tensions across the region, the persistent security challenges in Afghanistan, and the hardening of Israel's stance on Iran have combined to create an inhospitable environment for Rouhani's planned détente. Furthermore, Rouhani has faced powerful domestic detractors, particularly among the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Iran's conservative elite. Indeed, the interaction between Iran's domestic politics and the international environment has imposed considerable limitations on Rouhani's foreign policy agenda.

Hassan Rouhani walked into the presidential office facing a challenge to his foreign policy vision in the shape of Iran's involvement in the Syrian conflict. The Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons on civilians in August 2013 brought this into sharp focus. While Rouhani gave some indication of disapproval and suggested a possible shift in policy toward Syria, it soon became clear that his government had very little control over Iran's policy on Syria. Iran's continued support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria effectively undermined Rouhani's stated foreign policy goals of repairing Iran's relations with its neighbors. Iran's ongoing military and materiel support for the beleaguered Assad regime, especially after the failure of the Geneva II peace talks in January 2014, reaffirmed Iran's image as pariah state in the region and internationally. The worsening conflict, however, served the interests of hardliners in Iran, in particular the IRGC, who were running Iran's Syria policy. The IRGC's increasingly bold approach to Syria has drawn serious questions about whether there are some aspects of Iran's foreign policy that are "off limits" for the president. Zarif purportedly told the US Secretary of State John Kerry at the Munich Security Conference in February 2014 that he did not control Iran's foreign policy toward Syria.⁴¹ In this vein, the IRGC Chief, Qassem Soleimani, is reported to have sent a message to the former-CIA Director David Petraeus in early 2008 claiming that same applied to Iran's interactions with Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Gaza, which were the IRGC's playground.⁴²

Rouhani's foreign policy agency was further undermined after the meteoric rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) group. ISIS's sudden declaration of a caliphate across Iraq and Syria in June 2014 enforced hardliners' claims that Iran needed to take a firm line on combating *Takfiris* in Syria and now Iraq. This saw Soleimani, who had previously kept a low profile, take on an increasingly public role.

Soleimani was frequently photographed on the sidelines of the battlefields in both conflicts, demonstrating the new boldness with which the IRGC was willing to pursue its objectives. It also sent a strong message to Rouhani that the IRGC's role in its immediate neighborhood was not negotiable. In many ways, the IRGC's response was successful—Iran became one of the most effective actors in the fight against ISIS, undertaking targeted airstrikes and backing Iraq's militias to take a lead in the fight. ISIS's retreat after the battle of Tikrit in March and April 2015 was widely attributed to the success of Shi'a militias under Soleimani's instruction, and in May 2015, Iraq's Shi'a militias were painted as the only force capable of pushing ISIS from Ramadi. These developments merely compounded Rouhani's marginal role in the Iraq portfolio.⁴³

The conflict with ISIS had consequences beyond the Iranian domestic sphere. The IRGC's assertive response has raised significant concern among Iran's neighbors. Saudi Arabia, in particular, interpreted Iran's behavior in Iraq as a move to establish the long-feared "Shi'a Crescent" across the region. The state-based sectarian tension escalated following the Houthi coup in Yemen in February 2015. Saudi Arabia views the Houthi movement as an Iranian proxy and blamed Tehran for the unrest. Demonstrating the depth of Saudi animosity and suspicion of Iran, Saudi Arabia quickly mobilized a regional force to quell the Houthi rebellion and reinstate President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. The swift and decisive nature of Saudi's response to the coup—as opposed to its response to ISIS—demonstrated just how poor Iran–Saudi relations had become by mid-2015. It also suggested that while Rouhani had been trying to present himself as the "Diplomat Sheikh" for nearly two years, he had barely made inroads with some of Iran's neighbors.

The rise of ISIS also emboldened the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. The fall of Mosul in June 2014 had demonstrated the woeful inadequacy of the US-trained and equipped Iraqi army, leading Iran and Western countries to provide weapons directly to the more-capable KRG *peshmerga*. Although this proved an effective policy as it prevented the ISIS push north, it also emboldened the KRG, leading to calls for independent statehood from key members of the Iraqi Kurdish community.⁴⁴ The KRG's independence would represent a significant conundrum for Iranian policymakers, who had long been concerned about the influence that Kurdish claims for independence in Iraq and Turkey might have on Iran's Kurdish population.

These regional events all took place at a time when Iran and the P5+1 were trying to negotiate a permanent nuclear deal. Although the deal was eventually clinched, the lengthy process demonstrated the significant gap between Iran's expectations and the international community's requirements. It was no secret that Rouhani was also facing considerable resistance domestically, with the hardline elite opposing a nuclear deal under any circumstances. Although Khamenei continued to support Rouhani, the disunity among conservative ranks became quite clear in conservative Iranian media outlets—Mehdi Bolukat asked in an article published by the *Jahan News Agency*, “Do you really think that the United States and Europe respect our nation's rights? Is their discussion of military options and the continuation of the sanctions based on such respect?”⁴⁵ It appeared that Iran's hardliners and the Hawks in Washington were on the same page; there was also considerable opposition to a deal with Iran in the West.⁴⁶ An editorial in *The Washington Post* also expressed serious concern about the concessions being given to Iran.⁴⁷

Indeed, it is clear that Rouhani would face a difficult path to foreign policy reform. He was not the first Reformist president to take office in Iran, but his two moderate predecessors Mohammed Khatami and Hashemi Rafsanjani had left mixed legacies, elected on platforms of hope and reform, but faltering under the weight of Conservative political pressure. Indeed, as Ansari observed, Rouhani's “inheritance is a poor one.”⁴⁸ Rouhani continues to enjoy the support of Khamenei but his opponents do not shy away from challenging him publicly. In a bizarre move in February 2014, his opponents sought to cancel his live TV address moments before it was due to commence.⁴⁹ Rouhani won that skirmish, giving the address an hour later on live TV after taking the matter to his thousands of Twitter followers. But tensions within Iran continue to fester and his opponents have managed to retain significant influence in the way Iran operates in its neighborhood. It remains to be seen if President Rouhani will continue to benefit from the Supreme Leader's endorsement, especially in relation to the nuclear dispute, and push Iran along the path of normalization with the international community.

In this context—and given these overarching challenges—this volume evaluates Rouhani's successes and failures by looking at test cases of the Iran's foreign policy. By evaluating Rouhani's performance across key relationships, including with the United States, Syria, and Turkey, as well as low-profile associations including the UAE and the Caucasus, this book evaluates Rouhani's foreign policy track record. Subsequent

chapters track the political conditions that Rouhani inherited and his ambitions in the region to provide a detailed account of how his foreign policy has worked in practice.

These considerations prompt us to ask a number of questions. How successful has Rouhani been in fomenting foreign policy change in his first two years? What opportunities have presented themselves, and can Rouhani make his own foreign policy? In addition, is Iran's foreign policy held captive to regional dynamics beyond its control? Indeed, while our contributors point to Rouhani's seemingly genuine desire to reconfigure Iran's relations with the world, it also becomes clear that Rouhani's legacy is already one of mixed success.

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CHAPTER 2

Iran and the Changing Regional Strategic Environment

Amin Saikal

In the midst of the highly volatile and conflict-ridden region of greater West Asia, stretching from Pakistan to Lebanon, the only country that can claim to have functioned as a relatively stable and secure constituent state is the oil-rich but heavily sanctioned Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran's economic and regional situation, together with its unique—and some might argue odd—Islamic system of governance, has confronted the country with serious challenges on a scale that few other states have experienced. Yet, Iran has managed to weather these challenges and has elevated its position to that of a critical regional player. As such, it has defied earlier doomsday predictions by some scholars and observers, who expressed skepticism about the longevity of its Islamic government that emerged under the political and religious leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in the wake of the Iranian Revolution in January 1979. Why has the Islamic Republic of Iran proved to be so resilient, and what direction is it likely to take for the foreseeable future?

Revolution and Change

The Iranian Revolution, commencing in 1978, was spearheaded by a rainbow movement, which was made up of many groups and individuals with differing political and ideological dispositions and aspirations. The overriding objective that many elements of the movement held in common was their opposition to the Shah's regime. They desired to see

the transformation of Iran into a constitutional monarchy, not necessarily an Islamic republic. The Iranians had already twice attempted to achieve such a transformation—in the early part and in the middle of the twentieth century—but without any enduring success.

Iran's first attempt at constitutionalism ended with a coup in 1921, led by Reza Khan, who established his own Pahlavi dynastical rule in 1925.¹ The second attempt was terminated by the August 1953 MI6-backed CIA-orchestrated coup that toppled the two-year-old elected and reformist government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq and reinstalled the Shah on his throne.² The Shah had succeeded his father, Reza Khan, 12 years earlier, but had been compelled to leave Iran for virtual exile in Switzerland, a week prior to the coup due to the crisis that had ensued after Mosaddeq's nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and the British rejection of that nationalization, as well as Mosaddeq's efforts to limit the Shah's powers in pursuit of political democratization. The Shah's reinstatement heralded the return of absolute monarchical rule, but this time at the behest of the United States, with Iran rapidly drifting into the US orbit as a frontline and oil-rich ally against the Soviet Union in the Cold War.³

When the Iranians mounted their third attempt at constitutionalism—the 1978–1979 Revolution—their target was not only the Shah's rule but also the United States due to its patronization of the Shah's autocracy. Yet, as the opposition lacked a united platform beyond discontent with the Shah's pro-Western dictatorship and his largely self-aggrandizing, oil-based accelerated modernization program, the only group that could seize the leadership of the revolution was the Shi'a Islamic establishment. While having suppressed or marginalized all other sources of opposition, the Shah could not achieve the same against his clerical critics. The charismatic and enigmatic Ayatollah Khomeini led the clerical opposition from his exile, which was first in Iraq from 1964 and then in Paris from mid-1978. The appeal of Khomeini's message was aided by his effective appeal to Shi'a Islam, with whose ideas a majority of Iranians had been imbued for centuries.

The Islamic Republic

It was against this backdrop that many Iranians rallied behind Khomeini and his zealous followers, enabling them to declare Iran an Islamic Republic with an Islamic system of governance and an

independent “pro-Islamic” foreign policy shortly after the Shah’s departure for exile on January 17, 1979. Khomeini’s transformation of Iran involved the “Islamization” of the polity within his Shi’a worldview that called for empowerment of the *mosta’zafin* (oppressed) over the *mostakbarin* (oppressors).⁴ This was accompanied by the denunciation of the United States and its regional allies, including Israel, for complicity in the Shah’s “crimes” against the Iranian people. However, the Islamic Republic faced hostility not only from the Iranian leftist and liberalist groups that it overpowered at the cost of thousands of lives but was also rejected by the United States and many of its allies as “fundamentalist” and unacceptable in the international system.⁵

As Washington was grappling with the “loss” of Iran as a vital strategic foothold, another episode that poisoned US–Iranian relations broke out. The Iranian hostage crisis arose when militant supporters of Khomeini took over the American embassy on November 4, 1979, and kept 52 of its diplomats captive for 444 days.⁶ The United States’ failure to rescue the hostages caused it much humiliation, but enabled Khomeini to enforce his condemnation of the United States as the “Great Satan.” However, Tehran did not escape these developments lightly. The Islamic regime faced international isolation and regional apprehension that only enhanced its own sense of fear and paranoia, casting doubts about the chances of its survival in the medium to long term.

Despite all this, the Iranian Islamic Republic survived many more challenges after coming to power. The challenges have ranged from the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq War, which proved to be the longest, bloodiest, and costliest war ever fought in the modern history of the Middle East. Likewise, the US policy of containing the Islamic regime through a severe regime of sanctions provided further challenges. The United States has also repeatedly used the threat of regime change and military action, advocated and supported strongly by America’s regional strategic partner, Israel. In addition, the Islamic Republic has coped with a number of highly destabilizing developments in its neighborhood, ranging from the 1979 Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan to the 2001 US-led intervention in Afghanistan, and the US-led occupation of Iraq lasting from 2003 to 2011. Iran has also had to deal with growing adversarial attitudes from a number of Gulf Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, the 2006 war between Israel and Iranian-backed

Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the ongoing Syrian crisis since 2011 in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring.⁷

The latest development, whose consequences remain unpredictable for Iran, the region and the West, is the rise of the Sunni extremist Islamic group, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS's establishment of a Caliphate or "Islamic State" since June 2014 on vast swathes of Iraqi and Syrian territories, and the US-led Western decision to confront ISIS, has presented Tehran with another daunting challenge. Tehran shares President Barack Obama's aim "to degrade" and eventually "to eliminate" ISIS as an extremely dangerous terrorist entity and threat to the region and the West.⁸ But Iran has found it necessary to deal with the ISIS phenomenon in ways that also strengthen its own regional position vis-à-vis any agenda that the United States and its allies may have.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has endured a difficult journey of trials and tribulations through all these developments. This has in many ways been the fate of Iran since its emergence as a distinct political and territorial actor more than two and a half millennia ago, although no Iranian regime prior to the Islamic Government had locked horns with a superpower like the United States. However, this situation has changed in the context of the election of moderate and pragmatic Hassan Rouhani to the Iranian presidency in June 2013 and US President Obama's long-standing overtures toward Iran.⁹ US–Iranian relations have lately taken a potentially upward trajectory.

Resilience Factors

The Islamic regime has over time proved to be a resilient and deft player. It has achieved domestic consolidation against any form of opposition and emerged as an influential actor in its region. Consequently, its regional and international adversaries have had to recognize its potential as a force for either stability or instability in the region. A host of variables may account for the resilience of the Islamic regime. But three of the variables are particularly important.

Governance Structure

The first variable concerns the nature of Iran's unique Islamic order, as defined by Khomeini's Shi'a version of Islam. Khomeini and his clerical followers blended Shi'a Islamic traditions with Persian nationalist ideas

within a very complex framework, and established a two-tiered system of Islamic governance that has now become quite firmly entrenched: one tier premised on the “sovereignty of God,” personified by a *velayat-e faqih* (a supreme Islamic jurist or a figure like Khomeini himself), who is endowed with enormous religious and constitutional authority over the polity. The second tier is designed to reflect the “sovereignty of people,” represented by a universally elected president and *majles* (National Assembly).

To safeguard the longevity of the system, various extra-political bodies, such as the *shora-ye negahban-e qanun-e assasin* (Council of Guardians of the Constitution), the *majles-e khobregan* (Assembly of Experts), and the *majma'-e tashkhiss-e maslahat-e nizam* (Expediency Discernment Council of the System) were set up. These were accompanied by the *sepahi-e pasdaran-e enghilab-e Islam-e* (Revolutionary Guard) and its affiliated *basij-e mosta'zafin* (Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed), the armed forces (*artash*), and the establishment of the *bonyads* (Charitable Trusts or Economic Foundations). Although all of these organizations were established outside the formal structures of the three branches of government, they were nonetheless linked to one another and to the formal structures in one form or another.¹⁰ The councils and assembly function within a vigorous system of checks and balances, and the *sepah* and *basij* act as the praetorian guards of the Islamic order. The *artash* are trained and equipped to act as an auxiliary force, functioning in conjunction with the *sepah* and *basij*, in defense of the country, and the *bonyads* perform not only humanitarian and economic functions inside Iran but also serve as a source of the Islamic regime's soft power through various aid projects in strategically targeted countries, especially within Iran's neighborhood.¹¹

Khomeini's approach to constructing the system was neither politically or ideologically monolithic. It was interactively *jihadi* or combative to re-Islamize the polity, if needed forcefully; *ijtihadi* or reformist whereby Khomeini's *ijtihadi* supporters could also gain potency within his Islamic system of governance. He considered the *ijtihadi* dimension as necessary if he were to build an Islamic Iran that would be modern and strong, capable of defending itself against internal enemies and outside adversaries. Khomeini seemed to be cognizant of the fact that his Islamic state could not simply exist in isolation from a changing, but deeply interconnected world. He was aware that his Islamic Iran had to operate within a world system, which was partly

anarchical, but largely driven by technological progress and affected by trade, resources, and the market. While zealous in his ideological disposition, Khomeini appeared to be mindful of realities of political life in a changing world. As such, he was sufficiently flexible from time to time to let pragmatism prevail over ideological dogmas.

Khomeini's framework and approach, which have largely governed Iran's domestic and foreign policy operations to date, spawned an essentially theocratic system of political pluralism. This has provided the Iranian Islamic order with a degree of inbuilt political elasticity, which has over time given rise to various Islamic factions, with most notably three of them at the forefront: the conservative, pragmatist, and reformist. The system from the beginning weighed heavily in favor of the conservative faction, which maintains dominance in most of the levers of power to the present day. It has nonetheless had space for other factions to assume the presidency and *majles* through electoral processes from time to time to make the Iranian system and the country's foreign policy postures palatable to the outside world.

In other words, whenever the conservative faction's ideological and policy behavior have proved too stagnant, the pragmatists and reformists have had an opportunity to engage in a degree of rectification. The result has been the election to the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani (1988–1997) as the head of the pragmatist group, Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) from the reformist camp, and moderate Hassan Rouhani (2013–), who has had the backing of both the pragmatist and reformist factions.

This does not mean that there has been no fragmentation within the ruling clerical elite. The bitter power struggle in the aftermath of the disputed 2009 presidential election clearly debunked any myth of the solidarity of the governing stratum. Nor does it suggest that the system is free from internal stresses and tensions as well as patronage, corruption, and a degree of functional ineffectiveness. What it does convey is that, notwithstanding the state's coercive powers, the system has a measure of internal elasticity that can enable it to engage in processes of reformation when necessary to cushion itself against internal wrath and foreign pressure.

US Policy Debacles and Mutual Needs

Another variable that has spurred Iranian resilience concerns the opportunities with which the Iranian Islamic regime is availed as

a result of international actors' policy behavior toward Iran and its region. In this, the United States has figured large. Washington's original rejection of the Islamic order and its policy of containing Iran have not been productive. The regime has been able to overcome or defy the United States' adversarial efforts for more than 36 years, and President Obama has finally recognized the futility of the US policy of containment. While acknowledging America's past hegemonic interference in Iran, he has given diplomacy priority as the first instrument to deal with Tehran, especially since Rouhani's rise to power. Since Iran's nuclear program had become a critical issue in the country's relations with the United States and its allies, both sides seized the important window of opportunity to reach a settlement on the matter and possibly open the way for a restoration of relations between them in the medium to long run. The April 2015 Lausanne framework agreement and the subsequent final deal in July that year marked an important step in the process. The agreement came about as a result of months of direct talks and negotiations—the first of their kind since the advent of the Iranian Islamic Government.

All this has come about largely in the context of mutual needs and vulnerabilities. Rouhani won the 2013 presidential election in a landslide in the context of Iran's dire economic situation, caused mainly by years of mismanagement under his hardline conservative predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and increased Western sanctions. Rouhani promised to improve the economy, to relax the political and social controls, and to improve Iran's foreign relations with all countries, without shaking the foundations of the Islamic regime. For this, Rouhani has needed to end sanctions by resolving the nuclear impasse with the United States that could also open the way for an influx of much-needed Western investment and high technology.

Equally, President Obama could do with Iranian help for a resolution of a number of pressing regional problems, the generation of some of which the United States has had a deep involvement. The Afghanistan and Iraq Wars proved very damaging to the United States. Following its 2001 and 2003 invasions of these two countries, respectively, the United States proved unable to achieve its original goal of transforming them into secure, stable, and democratic states. Despite massive investment of US blood and treasure, both Afghanistan and Iraq remain mired in violence and insecurity. In Iraq, the United States ended its military involvement at the close of 2011, but it left behind a country broken and deeply embroiled in sectarian conflict

and political paralysis. This has been instrumental in helping the rise of ISIS and prompting the United States and its allies to launch another military campaign to save Iraq from ISIS and total disintegration. As for Afghanistan, where the United States and its NATO allies formally ended their combat deployment at the end of 2014 in what President Obama called a “responsible withdrawal,”¹² the country’s future hangs in the balance. While the Taliban insurgency remains robust, Afghanistan will lack the necessary institutions and resources to achieve stability and security on its own for many years to come, provided that it does not fall apart in the meantime.

In addition, the United States has found itself paralyzed and unable to play any meaningful role in securing a resolution of the Syrian conflict since early 2011. The United States opposed the Iranian-backed regime of Bashar al-Assad and declared its full support for the Syrian opposition, but in practical terms, it has ended up lending support to the regime by confronting the ISIS and several other rival Sunni extremist groups that have formed strong elements of the Syrian opposition. Nor has the United States been able to achieve tangible results in resolving the problems of the politically driven confessional problems of Lebanon, where the Iranian-backed Hezbollah reigns politically and militarily supreme. Similarly, the United States has scored nothing in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, as it has failed to persuade or prompt its strategic partner to negotiate with the Palestinians for a comprehensive settlement and thus diminish Iran’s role as a strong supporter of the Palestinian cause. Equally, it has not achieved much when it comes to its purported support for democratic reforms in the Arab world. Authoritarian rule is still dominant across the domain and lies at the root of many disturbing developments in the region. All this has made a profound contribution to the decline of American influence in the Middle East.

Islamic Pragmatism

A final variable that has ensured Iranian resilience is the fact that despite Tehran’s strong public Islamic ideological stance, its foreign policy is driven largely by nuanced Islamic pragmatic rather than idealistic considerations. It has often relied on ideology as a source of justifying rather than guiding policy. A glance at the Islamic regime’s foreign policy behavior from the early years of the revolution clearly indicates that the regime has been quite deft in most of its foreign

policy moves. It has made sure that they are conducted more or less in relation to the changing domestic needs and regional and international environments. This has been as much the case with its policy attitude toward the United States as it has been in the conduct of its relations with regional states and beyond. It has rarely failed to make necessary foreign policy adjustments, albeit on a proportionate scale, when demanded by changes in Iran's domestic conditions as well as regional and international settings.

In its foreign policy conduct, the Iranian regime has shown a considerable degree of flexibility, depending on the nature of the issues and realities of the time. It has done so in ways not to appear, to make too many compromises that could render its Islamic ideology obsolete as an instrument of popular mobilization. There are many examples that illustrate this point, the most significant of which includes Tehran's acceptance of an unconditional ceasefire in the war with Iraq in 1988, despite Khomeini's earlier resolute refusal to do so until Iraq was declared as the aggressor, paid war reparations, and released all Iranian war prisoners. This was also seen in Iran's neutrality over the US-led military campaign to reverse the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and its acceptance of UN mediation to avoid a war with the Pakistan-backed Taliban over the militia's killing of 11 Iranian consulate staff in northern Afghanistan in 1998. Likewise, Tehran backed America's overthrow of the Taliban regime and played a helpful role in supporting American efforts to materialize the Hamid Karzai government that replaced the Taliban in 2001, and also resolved not to cause any obstacles to the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq.

Lately, Tehran has refrained from directly confronting Saudi Arabia over both the latter's military deployment in the Shi'a majority but Sunni minority-ruled Bahrain, and also the Saudi-led Arab campaign against the allegedly Iranian-backed Shi'a Houthis in Yemen, where the Houthis have succeeded in taking over the capital since September 2014. Further, it has encompassed Rouhani's endeavors to secure a resolution of the nuclear impasse with the United States and its allies and consequently to end Western and international sanctions. Even in the ongoing Iraqi crisis, despite his distrust of the United States, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has demonstrated pragmatism in combating the common enemy, ISIS. While criticizing the US-led air campaign and advisory role in Iraq that also covers Syria without Damascus's approval and publicly declaring noncooperation with the US-led coalition, he has allowed Iranian commanders to communicate

with their American counterparts on the ground in support of the US-led mission.¹³ Khamenei has done this in the knowledge that Tehran has sufficient leverage in both Iraq and Syria to neutralize any future US political influence beyond its anti-ISIS campaign.

In a similar vein, Tehran has provided advisory and combat support to the US-allied Kurdish *Peshmerga* militia,¹⁴ despite its past opposition to any degree of autonomy for the Iraqi Kurds that could become a source of inspiration for Iran's Kurdish minority to seek a similar status. It has provided support on an even larger scale to the military forces of the Shi'a-led Iraqi government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and Iran-linked Shi'a militias, including the Mehdi Army of Muqtada al-Sadr, against ISIS.¹⁵ Ironically, the United States and Iranian regional interests have never been closer, although this comes at Israel's deep annoyance and Saudi Arabia's apprehension.

Tehran's Exploits, Proxies, and Hard Power

Meanwhile, Tehran has rarely failed to exploit favorable situations when they have arisen to boost its soft and hard power to strengthen its regional influence, which it claims is mainly for defensive purposes. It has managed this largely through proxy operations that it uses to build leverage when cultivating close relationships with either governments or subnational forces in the region—from Afghanistan to Iraq to Syria to Lebanon and Palestine. These relationships are not all of a security and military nature. Many of them also have serious political, economic, trade, and cultural dimensions.

In this respect, Tehran's activities have ranged from making a substantial financial contribution to the reconstruction of Afghanistan, giving cash donations to former Afghan President Karzai (2001–2014) and fostering close economic and trade ties with Western Afghanistan. Iran has also provided large-scale material and nonmaterial aid, including military assistance, to the Iraqi and Syrian governments. *Bonyads* have been one of its most effective tools for its humanitarian and cultural activities. All this has helped Tehran to secure a considerable amount of proxy power in the region. The Iranian model of Shi'a pluralist theocratic governance may not be attractive to many countries in the region, but its proxy forces have so far proved to be quite instrumental in helping Tehran to be a critical regional player, irrespective of all the intertwined internal and external pressure on it.

At the same time, the Islamic regime has invested heavily in building its hard power. Certainly, Iran's military capability has not been tested since the end of the Iran–Iraq War, although by all accounts the country's military machinery and security forces have not acquired the technological and firepower capability to make it the superpower of the region. However, Iran has achieved a level of military organizational and fighting capability that in conjunction with Tehran's regional proxy forces could make an attack on Iran very costly for its perpetrators. The multifaceted and powerful *sepah*, together with *basij* and *artash*, form the backbone of the Iranian national defense forces, and the best weapons in their inventory include short-, medium-, and long-range missiles, capable of hitting targets as far away as Israel. These forces are trained religiously and fanatically, first and foremost, to guard the Islamic regime, and they are backed by an array of extra paramilitary and security organizations in reserve that can be mobilized rapidly. Cadres are given special privileges above and beyond a great majority of the Iranian public. The members of *basij* are recruited, schooled, trained, and indoctrinated from a very young age. By the time they are ready for potential combat, they have developed unquestionable loyalty to the Islamic Government.

US–Iranian Relations

President Obama appears to have been convinced that if there is a major improvement in US–Iranian relations, Washington could possibly enlist Iran's assistance to resolve some of the regional problems and improve America's standing in the region. Obama has concluded that for now the best course of policy action toward Iran is to use diplomacy in settling US–Iranian differences and to come to terms with Iran's Islamic regime and do business with it. In this, he has so far managed to deflect serious objections on the part of his opponents in the United States and in the region, although the forces of the “Right” have never failed to invoke the memories of the hostage crisis to torpedo the chances for an improvement in US–Iranian relations. Similarly, while Israel has persistently opposed US negotiation with Iran, Saudi Arabia and some of its GCC partners have also expressed their concerns in the event of a US–Iranian rapprochement.

The opposition to Obama's reconciliatory moves is paralleled in Iran, where Rouhani has his own conservative factional opponents

within and beyond the governmental system at all levels. They include a number of powerful clerical and nonclerical individuals and groups, operating in the extra-governmental bodies, such as the Council of Guardians and the *majles* as well as in the media, where the editor of the *Kayhan* newspaper, the mouthpiece of the conservatives, leads the pack. These forces have a strong vested interest in the continuation of the status quo. They are wary of the implications that Rouhani's settlement of the nuclear issue and rapprochement with the United States could have for their fortunes. The Supreme Leader backed Rouhani in his pursuit of a final nuclear agreement, provided that it did not impinge on Iran's status as an independent, sovereign Islamic state or compromise the country's right under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to enrich uranium. Khamenei invited the conservative forces to support Rouhani in his endeavors. However, the President's critics, who include a strong contingent of Ahmadinejad's supporters, have at times been virulent and uncompromising toward the president. They have not hesitated in accusing him of selling out to America or to impede the implementation of his reform agenda.¹⁶

Indeed, one cannot be certain that either Obama's approach, which began with his first overture to the Iranian leadership in his 2009 Cairo speech, or Rouhani's reciprocal need for ending the sanctions will lead to a close working ties between Washington and Tehran. However, the signing of the nuclear deal might enable both sides to commence a new chapter in what has been a troubled relationship for more than three decades. Stressing the importance of Iran, in an interview in late December 2014, Obama said that if Tehran plays it right

... there's incredible talent and resources and sophistication inside of Iran and it would be a very successful regional power that was also abiding by international norms and international rules—and that would be good for everybody.¹⁷

He even hinted at the possibility of the United States reopening its embassy in Tehran.¹⁸ An alternative to the negotiated settlement of the nuclear issue could have been a military confrontation, which both sides wanted to avoid, despite Israel's continued insistence to Washington that military action against Iran's nuclear facilities is the best option.

Should there be a restoration of relations between the two adversaries, it would have the potential to change the regional strategic

environment, with serious implications for the correlation of forces in the region. In spite of their present apprehension, Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Arab world may find themselves with little choice but to scale down their concerns about what they perceive as Iran's regional sectarian and geopolitical ambitions. Similarly, the Iranian Islamic regime will have less reason to feel that the GCC acts as part of a US-backed plot to undermine its position.

Such developments could shrink the arena for the geopolitically driven sectarian Iranian-Saudi proxy conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, as well as for Saudi Arabia's deepening strategic ties with nuclear-armed Pakistan, an alliance which may have been in part motivated by the mutual search for future assurances against Iran in the event of the latter acquiring a military nuclear capability.¹⁹ It could also help stability to return to Afghanistan, as the Saudis and Pakistanis would be less concerned about countering Iranian influence in that war-torn country. Both Islamabad and Riyadh are in a position to point the Taliban-led insurgency in the direction of a political settlement in Afghanistan. The wider implications could be a viable resolution of the Syrian and Iraqi crises. Even Israel may have fewer reasons to remain opposed to a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians, based on the internationally backed principle of a two-state solution.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the diversity of views about the Iranian Islamic regime and its policy behavior, the regime is now well entrenched. It has extensively neutralized or marginalized any alternative and has proved to be a widely responsible actor. It has been a deft actor, not as irresponsible and dogmatic as has often been presented in the West. With the Middle East and more specifically its West Asia and Gulf components becoming increasingly volatile and conflict-ridden, the United States and its allies may find that a policy of engaging the Iranian regime is the best option for all sides and the region. It could help the Iranian Islamic moderates and reformists within what is essentially a pluralist ruling clerical stratum to press on with their reformist agenda, as advocated by Rouhani.

The more Rouhani succeeds in his reformist objectives, the more he will be able to show the tangible benefits of his conciliatory dealings with the United States. This may help to dampen the efforts

of his critics and boost the position of moderates and reformists to persuade their hardline opponents that they need to fall in line with changing times. Similarly, the successful implementation of reformist policies will place President Obama in a better position to convince his domestic and regional critics to modify their behavior toward Iran, and as a corollary, help him to resolve the longest and most damaging conflict in the region: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A US–Iranian rapprochement could trigger a cascade of win–win situations for all parties involved in the increasingly turbulent and oil-rich Middle East.

Notes

1. See Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran: Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). pp. 69–118.
2. Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran: Between Two Revolutions*. pp. 267–280.
3. Amin Saikal, *The Rise and Fall of the Shah: Iran from Autocracy to Religious Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). Chapter 2.
4. For details of Khomeini's vision, also see Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islamic Government* (Springfield, VA: National Technical Information Service, 1979).
5. Amin Saikal, *Zone of Crisis: Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014). pp. 107–113.
6. The hostage crisis is discussed in detail in David Farber, *Taken Hostage: The Iran Hostage Crisis and America's First Encounter with Radical Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
7. For a discussion of Iran's reaction to the "Arab Spring" and relations with Syria and Hezbollah, see Shahram Akbarzadeh, "The Arab Revolution is bad news for Iran," in *Democracy and Reform in the Middle East and Asia: Social Protest and Authoritarian Rule after the Arab Spring*, ed. Amin Saikal and Amitav Acharya (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).
8. For the full text of Obama's speech on IS, see Barack Obama, "Statement by the President on ISIL," *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, September 10, 2014, accessed June 9, 2015, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>
9. Obama began making these overtures during his first presidential campaign and continued to intensify it in the coming years. In a bold move, he even sent a secret letter to Khamenei to the effect that diplomacy between the United States and Iran over the nuclear issue might presage a broader rapprochement. See Spencer Ackerman and Dan Roberts, "Obama pens secret letter to Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei as nuclear deadline looms," *The Guardian*, November 7, 2014, accessed June 9, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/nov/06/obama-letter-ayatollah-khamenei-iran-nuclear-talks>
10. Amin Saikal, *Zone of Crisis*, pp. 107–113.

11. For details, see Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), chapters 7–8.
12. For Obama's full statement, see Barack Obama, "Statement by the President on Afghanistan," *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, May 27, 2014, accessed June 9, 2015, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/27/statement-president-afghanistan>
13. *BBC News*, "US rules out military co-operation with Iran against IS," September 5, 2014, accessed June 9, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29088180>
14. *Aljazeera*, "Iran 'sent soldiers to fight in Iraq,'" August 23, 2014, accessed June 8, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/08/iran-soldiers-iraq-islamic-state-2014823161322258630.html>
15. For the comments of the Iranian Majles speaker, Ali Larijani, on the issue, see Tehran Times, "Iran spares no effort in helping Iraqis: Larijani," December 27, 2014, accessed June 9, 2015, <http://tehrantimes.com/politics?device=xhtml&start=820>
16. For a discussion of opposition to both Obama and Rouhani, see Scott Steams, "Obama, Rouhani face domestic opposition to nuclear deal," *Voice of America*, November 6, 2004, accessed June 9, 2015, <http://www.voanews.com/media/video/2510955.html>
17. *Reuters*, "Obama: Iran has 'chance to get right with the world'—NPR," December 29, 2014, accessed June 9, 2015.
18. *Reuters*, "Obama: Iran has 'chance.'"
19. Taimur Khan, "Saudi Arabia and Pakistan forge stronger strategic alliance," *The National*, February 10, 2014, accessed June 9, 2015, <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-and-pakistan-forge-stronger-strategic-alliance>

CHAPTER 3

Iran's Janus-Faced US Policy: The Rouhani Administration Between Continuity and Change, Opportunity and Constraint

Morgane Colleau

Introduction

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the political dynamics between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) have often been central to policymakers' and analysts' assessments of a wide range of geopolitical developments. In the absence of formal diplomatic relations, pervasive mutual distrust and vitriolic exchanges have structured the two states' patterns of interaction. Time and time again, the US–Iran conflict has aggravated regional tensions. In Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria, for example, the two have often pursued conflicting aims and priorities, thus undermining prospects for stability and security.

The controversial topic of US–Iran relations gained new prominence with President Hassan Rouhani's election in June 2013. The renewed interest among analysts, journalists, and policymakers is due, in part, to the Rouhani administration's repeated articulation of its wish to transform the US–Iran relationship. Its diplomatic language and strategies contrast markedly with the Ahmadinejad administration's more confrontational tone and behavior, raising important questions about Iran's national interests. This chapter thus explores the main characteristics of the Rouhani administration's US policy during the first two years of its mandate, shedding light on key aspects of

its foreign policymaking and general structures of identity and interests *vis-à-vis* the superpower. Understanding how and why the current regime's US policy may have differed from those of its predecessors calls for a contextualization of Iran's US policy since the Revolution.

To this end, this chapter first notes that Iran long pursued a dual strategy toward the superpower, oscillating between resistance/defiance and conciliation/engagement. Although analysts and policymakers mostly focused on Iran's challenges to the United States, the IRI repeatedly adopted forward-leaning strategies toward the superpower. These diplomatic initiatives were pursued within different domestic contexts and geopolitical circumstances. As such, they challenge the conventional wisdom according to which enmity with the "Great Satan" constitutes an uncompromising pillar of the IRI, without which the regime would experience a profound identity and legitimacy crisis. After analyzing the chief aspects and drivers of Iran's Janus-faced policy toward the United States, the analysis turns to the Rouhani administration's aims and priorities. Its economic agenda profoundly informed its foreign policy options and strategies, particularly its emphasis on deepening and diversifying friendly relations with regional and extra-regional actors. Within this context, Iran's more conciliatory attitude toward the United States was rooted in both normative principles and cost-benefit calculations. Third, the chapter focuses on the main opportunities and challenges that the Rouhani administration faced in transforming the dynamics of US-Iran relations away from the path of dependency and toward more collective identity formation. Within the first two years of its mandate, the Rouhani administration enjoyed substantial, yet contested, political space and geopolitical opportunities to pursue forward-leaning strategies. The institutionalized enmity between the United States and Iran underwent a profound transformation, signaled and sustained by new processes of interaction. Its long-term effects, however, remain uncertain. Unless a comprehensive nuclear agreement is reached and Iran's long-standing desire for the recognition and acceptance of its geopolitical role in the Middle East and Central Asia are acknowledged, the Iranian leadership will continue to rely heavily on its resistance strategies *vis-à-vis* the United States.

A Dual US Policy

The following sections explore the main characteristics and motives for Iran's dual US policy. The Iranian leadership holds profoundly negative

beliefs about the superpower's intentions and behaviors toward the IRI, as well as within its neighborhood and the international system. Despite this antagonism, Iran repeatedly attempted to reach out to the United States and undo the costly effects of their adversarial relations. Iran's situation of discursive and strategic dependence on the United States explains its carefully calibrated engagement attempts. Indeed, less conflictual relations would reduce its security dilemmas and help bridge the gap between Iran's perceptions and understandings of its legitimate interests on the one hand, and its ability to play a role commensurate with its geopolitical aspirations on the other. Additionally, Ayatollah Khamenei, whose position is particularly important in light of the IRI's power structure, has adopted increasingly nuanced views on the question of US–Iran relations.

Condemnation and Resistance

Revolutionary processes have significantly affected Iran's national interests and foreign policy practices. Guided by its formative slogans, “neither West nor East, only the Islamic Republic” and “independence, freedom, Islamic Republic,” Iran shifted to a foreign policy of self-reliance.¹ The regime aspired to fundamental cultural, political, and economic independence, and advocated firm resistance of foreign interference in both internal politics and regional dynamics. As such, the Revolution aimed to free Iran's decision-making processes, an objective that Iranian officials have since actively defended.² Furthermore, Iran rejected the structure of the international system, particularly its core-periphery dynamics between the *mosta'zafin* (the oppressed) and the *mostakbarin* (the oppressors). Iran thus chose to advocate an anti-status quo and pro-Third World foreign policy to undermine the global hierarchy and injustice.

Overall, the United States played an indirect but crucial role in the *raison d'être* of the Revolution and the IRI's founding principles. It ceased to be perceived and treated as Iran's greatest ally and became its significant Other: the “Great Satan” was the main threat to its national dignity and independence, and also to a just and stable international system.

The Islamic Revolution had several important consequences, such as the 1979 seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran, which led to a parallel reconfiguration of the US identity and interests *vis-à-vis* its former Iranian ally. Thus, beginning in the late 1970s, Iran–US relations

shifted from relative trust and friendship to miscomprehension, mistrust, and worst-case assumptions. From then on, the two actors never ceased to perceive each other as a profound threat to their national interests. Beeman persuasively observes that Iranian and American public opinion faced “very stark mythological representations of the other side designed to play as much as possible to their sense of villainy and evil.”³ Similarly, Adib-Moghaddam notes that their respective political elites were not reacting to “the immediate reality of the other side, but [to] representations of that reality which [were] filtered through thick layers of normative and institutional structures.”⁴

The US–Iran enmity embedded in the individual and collective consciousness had important political consequences. Limbert is quite right to argue that “hostility begets hostility”: their culture of mistrust and routinized practices of estrangement made their inimical relations a self-fulfilling prophecy.⁵ Successive US administrations mostly pursued policies of isolation, containment, and deterrence against what they considered to be a rogue regime that supported terrorist groups, sought weapons of mass destruction, failed to recognize the state of Israel, opposed the Middle East Peace Process, and systematically violated human rights. As Ferrero contends, the socially constructed United States “Iran Narrative . . . [is] a collection of myths, frames, themes, characterizations, and over-simplifications which depicts the Islamic Republic as uniquely evil and beyond the pale,” profoundly reduced the desirability of pursuing policies of engagement with Iran.⁶ The idea that the Iranian regime was “irrational and fanatical as a function of its DNA” also prohibited viewing it as a normal actor with legitimate security concerns and geopolitical aspirations.⁷

From the Iranian leadership’s viewpoint, the United States had never come to terms with either the system of the IRI or Iran’s legitimate regional influence. The superpower systematically sought to undermine its stability and interests, both directly (via sanctions) and indirectly (via proxy support for internal and external opponents). The United States’ superior technological capabilities, global network of military bases, and regional security partnerships also raised the specter of a possible military intervention in Iran’s territory—a risk that increased in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, when the Bush administration shifted to policies of regime change and identified Iran as a member of an “Axis of Evil.” Thus, as Farhi and Lotfian highlight, “the ‘America question’ or what kind of traditional or soft threats the United States poses for Iran’s strategic ambitions and how

to counter them has played a very large role in Iran's foreign policy discussions."⁸

Iran's preoccupation with the United States resulted in continuous internal and external balancing strategies.⁹ Its financial, political, and military support of nonstate actors (Hamas and Hezbollah) and its development of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) formed critical components of its multipronged deterrence strategies. Iran also attempted to consolidate its relations with energy-hungry states, China especially, as a means to undermine US-led efforts to create a united front against it.¹⁰

Conciliation and Engagement

Despite its resentment and profound mistrust of the United States, and its reliance on complex balancing strategies, the Iranian leadership nevertheless attempted to improve the countries' conflictual relations. In particular, Iran made repeated attempts to engage the United States in discussions on bilateral and regional issues.¹¹ These became more prominent after the United States launched its War on Terror and increased its involvement in the Middle East and Central Asia. For example, the Khatami presidency inaugurated a range of symbolic and practical gestures to lay down a path for less antagonistic relations. These diplomatic efforts included the President's call for "a dialogue among civilizations" (first proposed during a January 1998 interview with the American television channel CNN); Iran's provision of crucial intelligence and military and political support to the US-led intervention in Afghanistan; and the unprecedented comprehensive negotiation proposal put to the United States in May 2003.¹² From Iran's perspective, the alliance-making opportunity in Afghanistan was also a turning point: it confirmed that the United States was willing to solicit Iran's help only where, and when, it could benefit American interests:

For us, that kind of dialogue symbolizes the unequal relationship the U.S. has sought to impose under cover of mutual respect. Iran was invited to participate only to the extent it had something to offer to the U.S.—not because it had something to say.¹³

Yet, despite the humiliating January 2002 Axis of Evil speech, President Ahmadinejad wrote unprecedented letters to President Bush and

President Obama.¹⁴ In 2009, he became the first President of the IRI to congratulate an American President on his election. Iran also made repeated offers of direct negotiations with the United States and several high-level meetings took place.¹⁵ Additionally, shortly after President Rouhani's election, evidence came to light that the Obama administration had launched secret talks with Iran in mid-2012, and a number of encounters had taken place since March 2013.¹⁶ Crucially, prominent Iranian political figures, including the Supreme Leader's foreign policy advisors Ali Akbar Salehi and Ali Akbar Velayati, publicly expressed their support for less conflictual relations between Iran and the United States.¹⁷ Every candidate in the June 2009 presidential election also agreed that direct talks would be desirable.¹⁸ In sum, the question of engagement ceased to be a taboo within Iranian political circles; it was "no longer [a question] of whether but of how—and to what end."¹⁹

Iran's repeated attempts to reduce antagonism with the United States call for three observations. First, its forward-leaning strategies can be understood within the context of its long-held desire for recognition of its legitimate identity and interests (discursive dependency). Second, Iran's offers of cooperation on regional issues indicated that the leadership sought to foster better mutual understanding in areas of great strategic importance to both actors and in which they also shared similar interests (strategic dependency). Third, the Supreme Leader, whose position must be integrated to contextualize the ebb and flow of Iran's US foreign policy, increasingly moved away from Manichean conceptions of the "Great Satan" and Iran's national interests *vis-à-vis* the United States.

Discursive Dependency

Following the 1979 Revolution, Iran and the United States engaged in battles of narratives that discredited one another and asserted their own legitimacy.²⁰ For Behravesht, Iran's "Westophobic" and "anti-Western" discourses, which represented the West as "satanic, unreliable, crafty, suppressive, and terrorizing," enabled the regime to define itself as "divine, reliable, honest, emancipatory, and reassuring."²¹ In so doing, however, Iran became "entirely dependent on invented images of the US in particular and the west more generally . . . the political independence of Iran [was] achieved via a discursive dependence" on the United States.²²

This dependence created a dilemma for Iran, since the United States was able to profoundly shape perceptions of the IRI as a rogue state with abhorrent policies. Such depictions contradicted Iran's self-perception as a force for good in the international system. Iran would likely continue to struggle to be recognized and integrated as a legitimate and constructive power unless the world's superpower acknowledged and treated it as such. The transformation of Iran's international status depended upon a shift in US discourses and behaviors toward the IRI. This situation, in turn, explains why Iranian officials systematically stressed that the United States needed to review its rhetoric and attitude. The May 2003 negotiating proposal, for example, included the demand to "rectify [the] status of Iran in the US" and eliminate references to "axis of evil" and "terrorism list."²³ Similarly, Iranian officials denounced the "carrot and stick policy," partly on the grounds that this was not "an acceptable phrase. It is for the donkeys. Iranians do not want to feel like donkeys."²⁴

Strategic Dependency

Since the Revolution, the United States' economic sanctions and its extensive influence within and beyond the Middle East region repeatedly affected Iran. The dual containment policy, which the Clinton administration initiated in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, aimed to establish a regional balance of power predicated on the isolation of Iran and Iraq. Although the policy shifted, Iran remained very much excluded from the regional security architecture and the international economic and security environment. From the Iranian leadership's viewpoint, the nuclear issue also illustrated the United States' considerable influence over both international institutions (the International Atomic Energy Agency and the United Nations Security Council) and third parties (the EU-3). Furthermore, despite global power shifts and the rise of actors increasingly inclined to challenge the international status quo, the United States' soft and hard power capabilities remained unmatched.²⁵ As such, it will likely continue to affect Iran's room to maneuver.

Within this context, a less security-oriented relationship could reduce the Iranian leadership's threat perceptions and pave the way for greater regional and international integration. Crucially, it could also provide more efficient responses to several security challenges common to the United States and Iran. Writing in 2013, Marashi identified

seven US national threats for which Iranian cooperation would be critical: nuclear nonproliferation, energy security, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, counterterrorism, and Arab–Israeli peace.²⁶ More recently, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Yemen have brought the interests of the United States and Iran closer together.

Ayatollah Khamenei: Beliefs and Calculations

Ayatollah Khamenei profoundly distrusts the superpower's behaviors and intentions, since it repeatedly harmed Iran's interests.²⁷ In his response to President Obama's 2009 Nowruz message, he thus noted that "Before the Revolution, Iran was in the hands of the United States," and that since the IRI's inception, the United States had "showed the green light" to Saddam Hussein's war against Iran, unconditionally supported "the cruel Zionist regime," and "insulted the Iranian nation, the Iranian government, and the Iranian president, over and over again."²⁸ The United States had also repeatedly attempted to overthrow the IRI, "whether through internal collapse, democratic revolution, economic pressure, or military invasion."²⁹ Ayatollah Khamenei also holds the United States responsible for much of the regional and global instability and insecurity: "the symbol of arrogance" viewed itself as "above justice" and pursued "unfair" and "discriminatory" policies, using its disproportionate material capabilities to "bully," "humiliate," and interfere in states' sovereign affairs, even as it preached democracy and human rights.³⁰

However, despite his prejudices, Ayatollah Khamenei increasingly seemed to view engagement as neither necessary nor intrinsically negative as long as core expectations were met: dialogue was "a function of political circumstance rather than ideological purity."³¹ The Supreme Leader expected "mutual respect" and US recognition of Iran's independence, sovereignty, and its natural and necessary regional role. In addition, he wanted the United States to put an end to its tactical cooperation and self-interested policies. In his 2009 response to President Obama's Nowruz message, he thus asked that the United States' promises be supplemented by concrete actions.³²

Domestic political calculations likely affected Ayatollah Khamenei's public stance on the United States. He showed a long-standing preference for striking a balance between a multiplicity of domestic groups, which shared conflicting interests and views on the US–Iran conflict and the benefits of engaging "world arrogance."³³ Additionally, he would need to be able to both claim ownership of any potential

transformation of US–Iran relations and frame it as a success for the IRI. As such, domestic considerations, including his relations and political brinkmanship with the President, would affect whether he could allow policies of rapprochement. Tellingly, Iranian officials were first able to offer bilateral talks and engage directly with their US counterparts at a time when the *Majles* (parliament), the Presidency, the judiciary, and the military and security establishments were all in the control of the more conservative factions and the reformist proponents of “the dialogue among civilizations” were isolated.

To conclude this first section, it is clear that the United States never ceased to be a prominent factor of concern for the Iranian leadership. In addition to playing a central, yet indirect, role in the revolutionary processes, the United States profoundly affected Iran's economic development, external relations, and international status. Routinized practices of isolation and containment strongly confirmed Iran's negative images, mistrust, and worst-case assumptions of the world's superpower. Despite its more limited material capabilities, the Iranian leadership systematically responded to the United States' coercive strategies with multipronged strategies of resistance and deterrence. At the same time, Iran repeatedly attempted to ameliorate their conflictual relations, particularly in areas where they shared interests. Reduced threat perceptions, better understanding of one another's priorities and strategies, and increased cooperation could help strengthen Iran's security position and international status. In 2009, the International Crisis Group highlighted that the Iranian leadership envisioned a wide-ranging strategic dialogue with the United States that would cover both bilateral and regional issues, as well as targeted cooperation on specific issues, all of which would occur against the backdrop of enduring competition and differences.³⁴ In other words, Iran aspired to neither the full normalization of US–Iran relations nor the abandonment of its Third-World and anti-status quo identity and behavioral commitments. Instead, it sought long-term dialogue to minimize the risk of confrontation, advance areas of mutual interest (strategic dependency), and secure recognition of the IRI's legitimacy and Iran's regional role (discursive dependency).

The Rouhani Administration: Balancing Needs, Objectives, and Constraints

Time and time again, Iran and the United States failed to capitalize on engagement opportunities. According to Marashi, “The great tragedy

of this relationship is that when one side was ready for a rapprochement, the other was not.”³⁵ While Murray labels their history of bad timing a “dialogue of the duff,” Slavin describes them as “out of sync” with each other.³⁶ During the first two years of President Rouhani’s mandate, however, a constellation of internal and external dynamics enabled unprecedented transformation of the US–Iran patterns of interaction.

While the Rouhani administration secured some domestic political space to reach out to the United States, the nuclear issue provided his government with the political opportunity to do so. Additionally, the Iranian regime interacted with a US administration led by a president determined to engage adversaries, resolve the Iranian nuclear issue, and rebalance American interests at a time of profound regional turmoil and global power transition. Ultimately, however, it is the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 that will determine the extent to which the Rouhani administration continues to enjoy the political space to pursue its proactive US policy. To understand this, the next section reviews President Rouhani’s economic and foreign policy agendas.

Key Aims and Priorities

President Rouhani was elected in June 2013 after a long political career. He had served as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (1989–2005), Director of Iran’s Centre for Strategic Research (1992–2013), and Chief Nuclear Negotiator (2003–2005). He was also a representative to the Supreme Leader during the Ahmadinejad presidency.

A large, informal coalition of mixed forces voted for Rouhani, showing that he had the support of a wide range of domestic political groups and prominent personalities.³⁷ Interestingly, he has proven particularly careful to portray himself as a “moderate,” a “centrist,” or the leader of “a non-partisan government,” in an attempt to limit factional infighting and strengthen national unity.³⁸ His platform of “Prudence and Hope” and ambition to “save the economy, revive morality, and interact with the world” very much set the tone for his approach to the United States.

During the Ahmadinejad presidency, Iran’s economic situation deteriorated profoundly, a development commonly attributed to the three-fold effect of sanctions, mismanagement, and corruption. Iran’s

economy thus figured high in the government's strategic calculations. In his declaration at the January 2014 World Economic Forum in Davos, President Rouhani emphasized three points.³⁹ First, oil-rich Iran remained a largely untapped market of nearly 80 million people with substantial investment opportunities. Second, Iran could become one of the top ten economies in the next three decades if sanctions were lifted and economic ties normalized. Third, his government intended to transform Iran's economic potential into a reality. This pledge complied with the requirements of the national "20-Year Economic Perspective" and the Supreme Leader's call for a "resistance economy." Adopted in March 2005 after being debated in the Expediency Council for several years, Iran's "20-Year Economic Perspective" was the IRI's "most significant long-term strategic document."⁴⁰ It identified an ambitious road map for the country's economic, political, and social developments. As such, it provided crucial insights into how the leadership conceived the country's national interests, particularly with regard to its ambition of transforming Iran into a "secure, independent and powerful . . . knowledge-based" economy by 2025.⁴¹

The Rouhani administration's ambitious economic agenda shaped its foreign policy priorities in important ways. First, President Rouhani acknowledged the constitutive relationship between friendlier relations and economic opportunities: "We seek effective and constructive diplomatic relations and a focus on mutual confidence-building . . . thereby enabling us to orient our foreign policy toward economic development at home."⁴² Economic and foreign policy considerations were thus profoundly intertwined. Second, only with a resolution of the nuclear issue could Iran expect the lifting of the (nuclear-related) sanctions and the emergence of better conditions for its relations with states and international firms.

Third, Iran's economic needs and ambitions, together with the necessity to bring an end to the decade-long nuclear issue, help explain why the Rouhani administration was considering "how," and not whether, to "rebuild and improve" relations with the United States "on the basis of mutual respect."⁴³ Besides acknowledging their history of mutual mistrust and its policy consequences, President Rouhani called for "rising above petty politics and leading, rather than following, pressure groups."⁴⁴ As such, he implicitly indicated that both administrations would need to engage in simultaneous moves. In particular, Iran required assurances that the United States would match words with deeds and overcome its powerful internal and external status

quo interests. Furthermore, the Rouhani administration emphasized that the increasingly interconnected international system constrained states' ability to deal with their security challenges unilaterally.⁴⁵ Terrorism, for example, was a global threat, "From New York to Mosul, from Damascus to Baghdad, from the Easternmost to the Westernmost parts of the world, from Al-Qaeda to *Daesh* (ISIS)."⁴⁶ Within this context, Iran presented greater multilateral cooperation as *a sine qua non* for more effective solutions to transnational issues.⁴⁷ This depiction created the possibility for "win-win" approaches between Iran and the United States, especially since Iran was in a position to "actively contribute to the restoration of regional peace, security, and stability."⁴⁸

To summarize, the country's economic recovery, and its ability to bridge the gap between its aspirations and its resources and capabilities, remained contingent upon a resolution of the nuclear issue and an improved atmosphere between Iran and its significant Other. The following sections explore the factors that enabled the Rouhani administration to oversee a noteworthy transformation of US–Iran relations during the first two years of its mandate.

The Nuclear Negotiations: Two Birds with One Stone

Between 2005 and 2013, negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 stalled repeatedly as each side held fast to uncompromising expectations and retaliatory strategies, in the form of acceleration of nuclear activities and sanctions, respectively. Rouhani had frequently expressed his disagreement with the Ahmadinejad administration's negotiation strategy and its disregard for the sanctions' economic and sociopolitical ramifications. Thus, quite unsurprisingly, the Rouhani administration has prioritized the nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 during the period 2013–2015. Its unfaltering commitment to reaching a long-term, comprehensive nuclear agreement calls for three observations.

First, the Rouhani administration has pursued the same strategic goals as its predecessors; namely, secure Iran's rights under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) to peaceful nuclear energy, including enrichment activities, and achieve meaningful sanctions relief. Following the August 2002 public revelations of its concealed nuclear facilities, Iran's red lines remained unchanged and were affected by neither domestic political developments nor the increasingly coercive diplomatic strategies. There was thus a profound

strategic consensus within the Iranian leadership on the country's nuclear program.

Iranian officials viewed it (and will likely continue to approach it) through the dual prism of economic independence and international status. On the one hand, nuclear energy was a sustainable resource that would reduce the country's dependence on oil revenues. On the other, Iran's nuclear activities symbolized and legitimated its status as a scientifically and technologically developed nation. This second aspect is particularly important, since it links to the regime's insistence that Iran be treated as any other non-nuclear-weapon state of the NPT. As President Rouhani wrote, "To us, mastering the atomic fuel cycle and generating nuclear power is as much about diversifying our energy resources as it is about who Iranians are as a nation, our demand for dignity and respect and our consequent place in the world."⁴⁹ Iran's nuclear program thus constituted (and will remain) a testing ground for external actors' acceptance of Iran's identity and legitimate interests.

Second, although the Rouhani administration reiterated Iran's long-standing red lines, it nevertheless oversaw a profound change in style and negotiating tactics. An innovative communication strategy that focused on *explaining* Iran's ambitions and interests as well as the sources of its security concerns and mistrust conveyed Iran's attempt to reduce the hostility of relations with regional and extra-regional actors. President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif wrote several pieces in English-language journals, gave numerous interviews to foreign journalists, and widely used social platforms, including Twitter and Facebook. Zarif's video "Iran's Message: There is a Way Forward" epitomized the administration's intent to bypass its detractors' discourses, reach external audiences directly, and offer reassurance that Iran was a stability-seeking actor.⁵⁰

The Iranian regime also proved willing to address its opponents' main concerns with its nuclear activities. With the November 2013 Joint Plan of Action (JPOA), which was agreed upon only three months after President Rouhani took office, Iran accepted to limit its production and stockpiling of sensitive nuclear technologies, halt construction at Arak, and allow greater IAEA access.⁵¹ As Iran's top nuclear negotiator from 2003 to 2005, Rouhani had overseen the only agreements—the October 2003 Tehran Statement and the November 2004 Paris Agreement—in which the regime had accepted to suspend uranium enrichment. In other words, the Rouhani administration took a leaf out of the *diplomatic sheikh's* own book.

The April 2015 joint statement between Iran and the P5+1 indicated Iran's continued willingness to compromise on the most sensitive aspects of its nuclear program.⁵² For example, the regime agreed that Natanz would be its only enrichment facility and that Fordow would be converted from an enrichment site into a nuclear, physics, and technology center. In exchange for the termination of all nuclear-related resolutions, Iran thus accepted to roll back and redirect crucial aspects of its program. Crucially, however, Iran jeopardized neither its independence nor its dignity since the Iran–P5+1 agreement acknowledged its right to the full fuel cycle.

Third, the Rouhani and Obama administrations used the nuclear issue as a proxy and a significant opportunity for *public* bilateral and multilateral encounters. For President Rouhani, this was driven by choice and necessity: he (and several officials in his administration) had a long history of pursuing more conciliatory strategies toward the United States, and his economic and foreign policy agendas required that the nuclear issue be resolved. Similar assertions can be made about the Obama administration.

President Obama had taken office with the ambition to engage “hostile states,” famously declaring during his inaugural address that the United States “will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.”⁵³ The 2009 Nobel Peace Prize winner had also affirmed his commitment to a nuclear weapon-free world.⁵⁴ Within this context, his 2009 Nowruz address to the Iranian people *and* regime was significant, because it indicated his wish to both transform US–Iran relations and reach a sustainable diplomatic solution to the nuclear issue.⁵⁵ However, Iran's disputed 2009 election, President Ahmadinejad's rhetoric, the expansion of Iran's nuclear program, and the fierce resistance of pressure groups all significantly constrained Obama's room to maneuver during the period 2009–2013. His administration rapidly shifted to a pressure track of sanctions and covert actions through, notably, the expansion of the Olympic Games program.⁵⁶ He became the American President who oversaw the enforcement of the most comprehensive regime of multilateral sanctions against Iran.

Nevertheless, President Rouhani's June 2013 election helped create the necessary political space and momentum for the second Obama administration to renew and persevere with its engagement efforts. A comprehensive nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1 would certainly resolve a profound challenge to international security and form a legacy-defining foreign policy achievement for President

Obama. Furthermore, the June 2014 fall of Mosul at the hands of ISIS added to an already long list of intertwined security challenges. ISIS operates within and between Iraq and Syria, meaning that the US and Iran's shared interests in containing its threats expand to these two countries. Iran considerably extended its influence over the Iraqi and Syrian central governments as well as its relations with various sub-state actors, especially the Shi'a militias.⁵⁷ The United States and Iran also pursued somewhat complementary strategies: an air campaign for the former, boots on the ground for the latter. Despite public denials of cooperation or intelligence sharing, signs of tacit coordination and noninterference have emerged; an implicit recognition that ISIS has created new webs of strategic dependence between them.⁵⁸

US–Iran Processes of Interaction: Novel Dynamics and Expectation Management

During the first two years of President Rouhani's mandate, high-level US and Iranian officials were able to hold meetings with unprecedented frequency. These public encounters indicated new, legitimate norms of interaction between the two governments, including between the Iranian Foreign Minister and the US Secretary of State. In September 2013, an Iranian and an American President had a telephone conversation for the first time since the late 1970s. Equally symbolic was the April 27, 2015, meeting between Secretary of State John Kerry and Foreign Minister Zarif at the New York residence of the Iranian Ambassador to the UN: "the first time in over two decades that the United States' top diplomat is known to have entered Iran[ian] diplomatic property."⁵⁹ For the first time since the 1979 Revolution, Track I diplomacy was at the forefront of US–Iran exchange.

Such enhanced contact may have allowed the two governments to challenge their own "invented myths" and better understand each other's position, aims, preferences, and priorities. Iran and the United States systematically prioritized cautious and conciliatory diplomatic language. While the Obama administration largely abandoned the "all options are on the table" and "dual-track" rhetoric, the Rouhani government framed the nuclear issue as a product of Israeli, rather than US, political manipulations. In so doing, both administrations focused on reducing their mutual antagonism. During his April 2015 appearance at New York University, Foreign Minister Zarif also asserted that Iran refused to interfere with US domestic politics. Asked if the regime

feared that the Republican-controlled Congress would force the President to revoke US commitments under a nuclear agreement with Iran, his response was unequivocal:

The responsibility of bringing [the US] into line falls on the shoulders of the President of the United States . . . He will have to stop implementing all the sanctions—economic and financial sanctions—that have been imposed on Iran . . . However he does it, that's his problem, as it will be my problem to implement certain [nuclear-related] measures.⁶⁰

Finally, following the announcement of the November 2013 JPOA, both sides sought to maintain a positive atmosphere, continuously emphasizing that their negotiations were achieving progress and a sustainable solution was within reach. They shared few details regarding the content of any of their bilateral and multilateral talks, however. In essence, while they signaled that their encounters were acceptable and necessary, thus breaking a long-time taboo, they simultaneously sought to isolate their discussions from pressure groups. This calls for two observations.

First, US officials engaged in a great deal of diplomacy following the April 2015 announcement. They portrayed the Iran–P5+1 agreement as far superior to any other arrangement for ensuring that Iran would not pursue a nuclear weapon and that its program remained under constant monitoring.⁶¹ The meeting between then-Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal and Secretary of State Kerry on November 23, 2014, a day before the self-imposed deadline for the Iran–P5+1 negotiations, was also a potent sign of the growing uneasiness of the US regional allies. For Israel and most Arab Gulf states, Iran's nuclear program was a threat to regional security and the Obama administration repeatedly proved shortsighted. Thus, following the April 2015 joint statement, US officials shifted to postnuclear agreement management strategies with a view to reassure their regional allies that neither their security nor their relationship with the United States were endangered. The May 13–14, 2015, US–GCC meeting epitomized the Obama administration's difficult balancing act between deepening its security assurances and cooperation with its apprehensive partners, while simultaneously minimizing points of contention with Iran and rebalancing its global interests (pivot to Asia).⁶² These conflicting pressures were also taking place in the context of growing

proxy battles within the Middle East region, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Iran.⁶³

Second, if the Obama administration's Iran agenda increasingly focused on managing growing domestic and foreign criticisms, the Rouhani administration faced substantial, yet fairly muted, internal pressures. Undoubtedly, the nuclear negotiations and the unprecedented US–Iran encounters are a double-edged sword for the Rouhani administration. If they succeed in solving the decade-long nuclear issue, they will considerably enhance the regime's political capital and legitimacy. If they fail, the Rouhani administration may be considerably isolated and the hardliners could find themselves in a stronger domestic position. Since the summer of 2013, opponents of the Rouhani administration's negotiating strategy have widely accused the government of jeopardizing Iran's nuclear rights and national security.⁶⁴ However, the Supreme Leader's carefully calibrated support for the regime has somewhat contained and curtailed their criticisms.⁶⁵

Not only did Ayatollah Khamenei present the negotiators as “children of the revolution,” but he also repeatedly called for “heroic flexibility” and did not oppose direct talks between Iran and the United States. As such, he helped legitimize the Rouhani administration's forward-leaning approaches. Additionally, he supported the November 2014 decision to extend the negotiations, telling high-ranking members of the IRGC and the *Basij* (youth militia): “I am not against extending negotiations as I was not against beginning them in the first place.”⁶⁶ On April 9, 2015, he reiterated the point that, although he was “not optimistic” about negotiations with the United States, he “still continue[s] to support them.”⁶⁷ He also made an unprecedented comment about Iran–US relations:

At present, we do not negotiate with America on any other issue . . . Today, the only topic for discussion and negotiations is the nuclear issue. Now, this will become an experience. If the other side gives up its usual diversionary tactics, this will become an experience for us that, very well, we can negotiate with them on other issues.⁶⁸

In other words, there is a connection between the nuclear issue and the future of US–Iran relations; a point that is consistent with the fact that the Iranian leadership evaluates US intentions toward Iran through the prism of its willingness (and ability) to recognize its legal and legitimate

nuclear rights. This, in turn, explains why the Supreme Leader clarified that he was waiting for the details of the comprehensive agreement:

Of course, I also said that not reaching an agreement is better than a bad agreement, and Americans also say this . . . Not reaching an agreement is better than an agreement in which the interests of the nation are downtrodden, the dignity of the nation is undermined, [and] the Iranian nation with all its grandeur is humiliated.⁶⁹

He also clarified that he would not interfere in the details of the negotiations, since his personal involvement was limited to setting broad policy guidelines and red lines. This illustrated the Rouhani administration's relative room for maneuver and the Supreme Leader's attempt to insulate his political legitimacy from the results of the multilateral nuclear negotiations.

Concluding Observations: Developing with or without the United States

During its first two years in power, the Rouhani administration's US policy prioritized engagement and conciliation over estrangement. While several Iranian officials had long advocated less conflictual relations, the regime's ability to deal with Iran's pressing economic issues and realize the national aspirations of the "20-Year Perspective" remained profoundly contingent upon a resolution of the nuclear issue. This, in turn, was unlikely to occur unless the United States and Iran were able to agree on the terms of a comprehensive agreement.

President Rouhani benefited from substantial political space to pursue a proactive foreign policy strategy of tension reduction. This was due to the President's political capital, including his articulation of Iran's foreign policy principles and nuclear red lines; the Supreme Leader's support; the relatively successful nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1; and the administration's powerful challenge to the rogue state status through an unprecedented communication strategy.

While epitomizing Iran's grievances and concerns with the United States, the nuclear issue provided a platform for unprecedented developments in Iran-US processes of interaction. At the discursive level, both administrations were able to publicly advocate a transformation of their relations, away from enmity and mistrust toward more mutual understanding and potential cooperation. At the practical level, officials met on numerous occasions, with an unprecedented frequency.

Enhanced interactions, contentious and carefully calibrated as they may have been, were becoming a new norm. Broken taboos, however, did not endanger the leadership's ideological principles, especially its opposition to hegemonic policies and its firm defense of national dignity and independence.

Iranian officials repeatedly emphasized that the future prospects for Iran–US relations were intertwined with, and contingent upon, a resolution of the nuclear issue. As such, their ability to reach a comprehensive agreement will either serve to challenge their institutionalized enmity or reify the legitimacy of their grievances and mistrust. Developments in the nuclear negotiations will thus also influence the types of strategy (cooperation, confrontation) that Iran will likely prioritize in areas where it comes into contact with the United States. Furthermore, as has been the case in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, Iran will continue to seek recognition of the inevitability and legitimacy of its geopolitical influence. Of growing importance to the future of US–Iran relations is the leadership's belief that Iran has a constructive role to play in Yemen and in the fight against ISIS. In fine, whether or not the Rouhani government succeeds in solving the nuclear issue, Iran will continue to hedge its bets to expand its influence. It will persist in its attempts to diversify its relations with its western and eastern neighbors as well as the rising powers. The more partners Iran has, the more able it will be to balance against external threats and engage with the United States from a position of strength.⁷⁰

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CHAPTER 4

Brothers or Comrades at Arms? Iran's Relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan

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The significance of religion to the political identity of Iran is made obvious by its self-designation as an Islamic Republic. This is complicated further by instances where Iran appears to favor non-Muslim states in their conflicts with Muslim peoples, seemingly at odds with the core values outlined in the 1979 Constitution. The Caucasus is one area where this accusation has been leveled against Tehran. In appreciation of the sensitivity and fragility of the region, successive Iranian administrations have fashioned themselves as unbiased arbiters in their diplomatic engagements with these states. Rather than “spreading the Islamic Revolution,” the Islamic Republic has displayed pragmatism, not interfering in the Chechen and Dagestani conflicts, for example.¹ In the oft-cited case of Armenia over Azerbaijan, both of which have been in a state of war over the Karabagh region for the past quarter of a century, Iran has long been understood to favor its only Christian neighbor over its (Shi’a) Muslim rival. Although Tehran has always denied the allegation, this interpretation is pervasive in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and it is one of the issues that current President Hassan Rouhani and his foreign minister Dr. Mohammad Javad Zarif have had to address to reset relations with Azerbaijan during their first term in office.

During the Azerbaijani President Heidar Aliyev’s official visit to Tehran in April 2014, Dr. Rouhani tackled the issue head-on, stressing

that Iran's policy toward the Karabagh dispute was that it should be resolved peacefully within the bounds of international conventions and without the changing of borders.² These comments were welcomed in Azerbaijan, where many saw the reference to borders as open support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. In contrast, far from seeing this policy as a change in fortunes, the Armenians interpreted the same statement as support for their territorial reality and the status quo, in which Armenia controls 20 percent of Azerbaijan's territory. Armenian commentators also pointed to Rouhani's comments on the need for peaceful and legal resolutions to the stalemate as disapproval of Azerbaijan's large military expenditure.³

The situation raises several important questions regarding the continuity and development of Iranian foreign policy. It sits at the center of debates on Iran's pragmatism in engaging with Muslim and non-Muslim state actors, provides insight in the role of "Iranian civilization" in diplomatic parlance, and delivers a case study in Rouhani's determination to improve Iran's image within its own neighborhood while not upsetting the power balance. This chapter will have a greater focus on Iran's relationship with Azerbaijan for two principal reasons: Tehran and Yerevan have experienced a far more amiable partnership since 1991 than Tehran and Baku, and President Rouhani had made improving relations a priority. This is demonstrated by the amount of attention his administration has paid to Baku in its first two years in office. Nevertheless, domestic and international pressures restrict Iran's ability to achieve a warming of relations. In order to address the discussions mentioned earlier, it is important to analyze the reasons why Iran has been seen as more pragmatic than ideologically driven in its foreign policy. This chapter will then outline the Islamic Republic's relationship with its South Caucasian neighbors, before reaching conclusions on the motivations, successes, and failures of the Rouhani administration's outreach to Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Background

Pahlavi and Hojati use the term "prudential realism" to describe Iran's apparently inconsistent approach toward foreign policy.⁴ An adaption from earlier theories,⁵ they use the term to mean that while Iran's "interests drive national choices," this does not always equate to "maximizing power through greater acquisition of arms." Ultimately, Iran's Islamic identity is a core element of its national ideology but is not

pursued at the expense of all others. Furthermore, Iran has not sought to strengthen itself through military power alone, despite the rhetoric, but has attempted to use “soft” diplomacy, both of a religious and of a cultural nature.

Perhaps one of Iran's greatest advantages in the region is its cultural capital. By cultural capital, I refer to the concept developed by Bourdieu that, alongside social and financial capital, is utilized for personal or group gain.⁶ Iran's cultural capital lies in its multicultural citizenry, many of whom are native speakers of the national languages of its neighbors: Persian, Arabic, Turkmen, Kurdish, and of course Azeri and Armenian. The Islamic Republic has made good use of this in its diplomatic engagements; the current commercial attaché to Armenia, Hamayak Avadisians, is an Iranian-Armenian. It is also a source of some of Iran's problems; for instance, Iran's positioning as a Shi'a power has led to it supporting nonstate actors at the expense of normal relations with other nations.⁷

Iran's multilingual population has facilitated its interstate interactions in a region where communication is complicated by ongoing conflict. It is also the main tool that Iran uses when engaging with countries that share a recent history with Russia and closer linguistic ties with Turkey, two strong competitors in the region. Iran's diplomatic isolation, in many cases a result of its earlier ideological commitment, has led to this pragmatism out of necessity. Furthermore, Iran's relations with the South Caucasian Republics are influenced by the sour relations the Islamic Republic has with the United States. Indeed, Iran's relations with Armenia can in part be explained by the latter's nonalignment with the United States. Equally, Iran's difficulties with Azerbaijan are related to Baku's connections to the United States and to Israel.

As mentioned earlier, the central dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which Iran cannot but be drawn into, is the Karabagh conflict. The root causes of Armenia-Azerbaijan disputes stem from the arbitrary nature of drawing borders in a diverse location, alongside twentieth century nationalisms which operated first as a point of distinctiveness within the Soviet Union, and later as a source of new identity following the collapse of the USSR. To paraphrase Hobsbawm, both Armenia and Azerbaijan have developed traditions built on reinterpreted histories, which allow each country to foster a distinct view of themselves and one another, as well as claim continuity with the past, often at the other's expense.⁸

The dispute centered on territory, namely, a region known alternatively as Nagorno-Karabakh in Russian, Karabagh (meaning “black garden”) in Azeri, and Artsakh in Armenian. Under the Soviet regime, Karabagh was an autonomous region with a predominantly Armenian-speaking population that formed part of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic. Toward the end of the Soviet Era, with the dawn of perestroika and glasnost, the autonomous government of Karabagh, dominated by Armenians, sought to join the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, which sparked protests throughout the Azerbaijani SSR.⁹ In an environment of uncertainty, intense competition, and opportunism, these protests became riots, pogroms, and ethnic cleansing before eventually descending into a civil war. This became an international war once Armenia and Azerbaijan declared their independence in 1991, especially after Karabagh declared itself independent of the latter (though not uniting with the former) in January 1992. What followed was two years of war in which a combined Karabagh-Armenian army took control of a large swath of land in the west of Azerbaijan, occupying up to 20 percent of Azerbaijani territory.¹⁰ Fighting ended in a ceasefire in 1994, though both sides are still at war and hostilities periodically break out.

Turkey remained a strong ally of Azerbaijan for the duration of this conflict. From the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan has pursued a political and economic development strategy modeled on Turkey.¹¹ Baku’s leanings toward Ankara are partially due to Turkey’s territorial disputes with Armenia but mostly because of its policy of supporting its Turkic brethren. Consequently, Armenia has been blockaded along its western and eastern borders since the early 1990s. The tiny mountain republic’s northern neighbor, Georgia, has proved at best unreliable, meaning that Yerevan has relied intensely on Tehran to avoid strangulation, Iran has therefore provided Armenia’s only reliable sea access over the past 20 years.

Iran’s Past Relations with Armenia

The durability of the Iran–Armenia relationship has surprised some observers given that it seemingly contradicts the Islamic Republic’s rhetoric and orientation. The relationship even survived Armenia shooting down an Iranian military plane over Karabagh in 1994. In fact, the Armenian delegation that traveled to Tehran to apologize for the incident actually returned to Yerevan with a new trade deal.¹²

At times, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has publicly condemned Armenia, although he has been equally direct with Shi'a clergy in Azeri-speaking cities in Iran, warning them against inciting their congregations.¹³ Though this may be, in part, an attempt to prevent Azeri nationalism from spreading to Iran, the Supreme Leader actually continued a tradition of Iranian religious leaders aiming to prevent Armenian–Azeri conflicts north of the Aras from spreading to Iran. Shi'a clerics played a significant role in discouraging intercommunal violence in Iranian Azerbaijan during the Armenian–Azeri ethnic clashes in Tsarist Russia following the 1905 Revolution, an action that was repeated following the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Iran in 1947, when anti-Christian sentiment was high.¹⁴

Iran and Armenia have worked together on a number of infrastructure and energy programs. The Armenian government has long been vocal in its support for Iran's nuclear program.¹⁵ This support has been reiterated under the Rouhani administration, making Armenia one of Iran's few regional allies.¹⁶ Overall, under Rouhani, the discourse has continued as before and Yerevan has shown little outward concern at Tehran's interactions with Baku. Armenia remains strategically important to Iran and is popular with Iranian travellers, many of whom find Yerevan to be an affordable destination for applying for British or American visas. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that Iran's relations with Armenia are as sweet as is occasionally portrayed. Armenia is pro-Russia which is currently unproblematic for Iran, but still leaves it in a different sphere of influence. The Armenian government is often just as corrupt and unreliable as Azerbaijan, which has been a major barrier to Iran fully opening to Armenia in trade, despite the rhetoric. Armenia, on the other hand, falls outside of the orbit of both the United States and of Europe.

Relations with Azerbaijan

By contrast, the relationship with Azerbaijan is a sensitive issue for the Islamic Republic for many reasons, not just because of Iran's support for Armenia. Azerbaijan's affiliations with Iran's enemies—the United States and Israel—are important, as are energy competition, environmental threats to the Caspian Sea and the claims by extreme nationalists in Azerbaijan over Iranian territory. Further complicating this is the great affinity that many Iranians feel for the people

of Azerbaijan, often to the point of considering themselves the same people.

Among the reasons why the Iran–Azerbaijan relationship is not so straightforward or as brotherly as their leaders claim that it should be, relates to the orientations of both countries. From Iran’s perspective, Azerbaijan had made it clear that it is firstly pro-Turkish. Although Turkey and Iran have developed a decent economic relationship, they wrestle over some divisive matters. Turkey is secular and generally sensitive to religion in politics, despite some changes since 2002 under the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP) government. Specifically, many Turkish political leaders are hostile to the Iranian model of government, and use it as an example—frequently exaggerated—of what Turkey could become like if religious parties take power. This feeling is mirrored in Azerbaijan, a country that experienced 70 years of antireligious Soviet rule that has proven difficult to shake. Azerbaijan, like Turkey, is also pro-NATO, fosters economic relations with the United States, and maintains an alliance with Israel. These relations with Iran’s enemies have been one of the greatest stumbling blocks in the improvement of their relationship. Iran is worried that Azerbaijan’s alliances with the United States and Israel have allowed it to become a staging ground for anti-Iranian groups and their activities. In particular, the Iranians have pointed to the Mojahedin-e Khalq, an Iranian opposition group that Iran considers a terrorist organization that has been at war with the Islamic Republic since the early days of the Revolution. Iran also claims that Israeli intelligence, namely Mossad, is active in Azerbaijan.¹⁷ Iran’s leaders believe that Mossad has used Azerbaijan to train dissidents who have been involved in the assassination of key nuclear program figures inside Iran, and that Israel has used Azerbaijani territory to launch intelligence drones over Iran.¹⁸

Finally, Iran often accuses Azerbaijan of trying to stoke Azerbaijani nationalism among Iran’s Azeri-speaking population. This stems from the very nature of Azerbaijani nationalism, developed during the Soviet Era, which claimed a greater antiquity to Azerbaijan than the archaeological record can confirm. This nationalism depicts Armenia and northwest Iran as Azerbaijani territory colonized by outsiders. One President of Azerbaijan, Abulfaz Elchibey, who during his short term from 1992 to 1993, went as far as to claim the Iranian provinces of West and East Azerbaijan, Ardabil, and Zanjan as part of southern Azerbaijan, causing serious damage to the relationship.¹⁹

The Ahmadinejad presidency furthered the divide between Azerbaijan and Armenia in Iran's foreign policy. During this time, relations with Armenia prospered, with increased trade as well as frequent exchanges of goodwill. The relationship with Azerbaijan, on the other hand, reached its lowest point since the early 1990s. In the last year of Ahmadinejad's presidency, there were several incidents that further inflamed relations. The first was the Eurovision contest, held in Baku in 2012. An Iranian cleric criticized Azerbaijan for holding the event, describing it as immoral.²⁰ Azerbaijanis responded by protesting in Baku, some of who held placards that accused the President and Supreme Leader of homosexuality. This crossed a serious red line for Iran, prompting a withdrawal of diplomatic staff in protest.²¹ A second key event was the arrest of several Iranian citizens in Azerbaijan on charges of planning a terrorist attack against American or Israeli interests. The case dragged on for many months and included reciprocal arrests in Iran of Azerbaijani nationals.²² Another incident—a constant source of frustration for the Iranian government—is the holding of conferences in Baku by separatist groups such as the World Azerbaijan Congress (*Dünya Azerbaycanlıları Konqresi*) that call for the annexation of "Southern Azerbaijan."²³ When such a conference took place in March 2013, protestors in Iran argued that the 1828 Turkmanchai Treaty was signed by the Tsarist Russian government, it was invalidated by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, and therefore Azerbaijan must be returned to Iran. The debate reached the floors of the Iranian *Majles* (parliament) with several representatives from Azeri-speaking districts creating a motion that called for the return of "Northern" Azerbaijan to Iran.²⁴ *Kayhan*, an Iranian newspaper often seen as a mouthpiece for the Supreme Leader, also joined the debate, insisting that Azerbaijan hold a referendum asking its citizens whether they wished to join Iran or remain independent.²⁵ These political maneuverings were shadowed by a culture war that continued into the first year of Rouhani's administration. This was seen when Iran protested the Azerbaijani government's decision to remove Persian inscriptions from the tomb of the poet Nezami Gancavi, who wrote solely in Persian. Around the same time, Azerbaijan made a bid to claim *chogan* (a form of polo common to many countries in the region, but which Iranian scholars consider to have originated in Iran) as part of their intangible heritage at UNESCO.²⁶

Relations with Azerbaijan Under President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif

An important aspect of Iran's engagement with Armenia and Azerbaijan under the Rouhani administration—and one that has been largely overlooked—is that Dr. Zarif and President Rouhani engage with these countries separately. President Rouhani has been at the forefront of negotiations with Azerbaijan, with Zarif largely in the background. The opposite is true of interactions with Armenian delegations, all of which have been formally welcomed by Zarif, with Rouhani maintaining some distance. This is no coincidence, and is part of Rouhani's strategy of trying to appear not too close to Armenia, avoiding photo opportunities, so as to assure Azerbaijan of his sincerity.

Rouhani's election as the seventh president of Iran fueled hope in Iran that Tehran's foreign policy would change. During his campaign and in the immediate aftermath of his election, Rouhani made several political statements in which he indicated that his administration would differ from Ahmadinejad's by promoting a nonconfrontational style. In addition to this, Rouhani sought to appeal to those who had been marginalized by the previous administration, not only domestically but also internationally, and encouraged them to reset their relationship with the Iranian state. During his campaign and then in his first press conference, Rouhani repeated the common diplomatic idiom used in reference to Azerbaijan, identifying the Caucasian republic as a strategic neighbor, and emphasizing the historical, cultural, and religious similarities between the two countries.²⁷

Rouhani identified the importance of mending relations with Azerbaijan and has spent more time attempting to engage Azerbaijan than Armenia. The state of the relations at the time of Rouhani's inauguration was clear: the Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan attended the ceremony while the Azerbaijani President Heidar Aliyev sent the speaker of the parliament Javanshir Akhundov instead. Aliyev's failure to attend the event gave some indication of the initial suspicion felt by Baku toward Tehran. Nevertheless, both President Rouhani and Dr. Zarif have tried to reset relations in several areas, paying a great deal of attention to Azerbaijan. However, their success has been largely relative to the situation they are facing.

Rouhani has met with Aliyev several times, first at Davos summit in January 2014, then when Aliyev formally visited Iran in April. The leaders met again in September on the sidelines of the Caspian summit

in Astrakhan, and most recently, when visiting Baku in November. The frequency of their interactions continued into early 2015, with Foreign Minister Zarif visiting his counterpart in Baku in February to discuss economic cooperation, and the Defense Minister Brigadier General Hossein Dehghan visiting in April 2015 to discuss regional security and arms production.²⁸ Importantly, Rouhani's administration has not neglected their relationship with Armenia, and by and large Yerevan–Tehran ties continue as usual. For instance, on his tour of post-Soviet countries in early 2015 mentioned earlier, Zarif's first stop was Armenia, where he met with Foreign Minister Eduard Nalbandian and discussed the continuation of their friendly relations.²⁹

In order to establish goodwill and open dialogue, Rouhani has carefully chosen positive expressions through which to refer to Azerbaijan. He has described their countries as sharing a family relationship, describing Azerbaijan as a “brother country,” as well as being friendly neighbors who trust one another.³⁰ When meeting with Aliyev on the sidelines of the Davos conference, Rouhani emphasized that common historical and cultural roots united their nations.³¹ However, in a sign of their ideological differences, Aliyev merely noted that Iran and Azerbaijan share common spiritual values and traditions.³² Indeed, Iran and Azerbaijan do not interpret their history in the same way, with Azerbaijan's secular and Turkey-orientated ideology viewing its history primarily in ethnic terms. Azerbaijan is uncertain about Iran's religious motivations, and Iran has not always allayed this fear. Following Rouhani's November 2014 visit, the Iran's Ambassador to Baku commented that the visit had reinforced cultural, religious, and denominational ties.³³ Although Iran claims to not pursue a sectarian agenda in its relations with Muslim nations, it is clear that they do seek some closer cooperation between Shi'a people, even if their adherence to Shi'ism is nominal.

Despite the improvement in discourse, two key differences remain between Tehran and Baku which will continue to restrict their engagement. Azerbaijan's relationship with Israel is highly problematic for Iran and is not an issue that Tehran will ignore. While meeting with Aliyev in 2014, the Supreme Leader made specific reference to Israel. Although the comments were not directly critical of Azerbaijan's relations with Iran's enemy, it would have nonetheless made the Azerbaijani President uncomfortable.³⁴ Iran's relations with Armenia might, conversely, also affect Azerbaijan's ability to trust the Islamic state. Because of this, Tehran has tried to quietly depict the

Iran–Armenia relationship as being in Baku’s interest—that is, Iran’s friendship with Armenia means they can pressure Yerevan on Karabagh to Azerbaijan’s advantage.³⁵

A second key concern is territory: separatist conferences were held again in Azerbaijan in 2014 and disputes regarding rights to the Caspian Sea still create bitterness between the two neighbors. Rouhani has dealt with these issues by playing down their significance or ignoring them. His main concern is not so much Azerbaijan’s good relations with Israel, bad relations with Armenia, or even passive support for Iranian separatist groups. Instead, the President is working toward expanding economic initiatives as part of his general policy aimed at improving living conditions in Iran so as to counter social and political tensions within the Islamic Republic. With this in mind, Rouhani has pushed for greater reciprocity in travel rules between the states, which he explicitly mentioned in his meeting with the Azerbaijani special envoy, Kemaluddin Heydarov, in Tehran in March 2014, when noting that both countries needed to promote bilateral relations which are “proper for both sides.”³⁶ Recent meetings between the customs authorities of both countries, first in Baku and later in Iran, have set the process of dealing with this issue into motion.³⁷

Rouhani has also attempted to reset the dialogue by changing Iran’s attitude toward minority languages. This is an issue of concern both to Armenia and to Azerbaijan, who have significant populations of their ethnic counterparts living in Iran. Presidents Khatami and Ahmadinejad, as well as their opponents in the presidential races, made promises of fully implementing the constitution on matters of minority languages, which at present are not taught or used freely in the media. Ahmadinejad, however, symbolically unraveled much of the progress that Khatami had made on this front, causing great consternation once removed.³⁸ This led to the outbreak in violence in areas where Persian is not the dominant language after Ahmadinejad assumed office in 2005. This violence was not only present in regions where there have been traditionally separatist movements, such as Kurdistan and Baluchistan, but also in the Azeri-speaking provinces which are well integrated into the Iranian state.³⁹ Rouhani made explicit mention of the recognition of Azeri, Kurdish, and Bakhtiari languages during his campaign, and in January 2014, sought to implement these changes, much to the chagrin of conservatives in the government and wider society.⁴⁰ Rouhani has stopped short of granting

official status to other languages, stating that Persian is necessary to unite the country.⁴¹

Nevertheless, this is a gesture that may be seen positively in Azerbaijan. Both Azerbaijan and Turkey have ties to the Azeri-speaking provinces of Iran mainly because many travel there to buy cheap goods such as medicine. However, the Iranian government is more concerned with the unfair travel and trade restrictions on Iran which mean that the visa requirements for Turks and Azerbaijanis to enter Iran are less restrictive than it is for Iranian nationals to enter their countries, which mostly affects Iranian business people attempting to trade in Turkey or Azerbaijan.

Rouhani has made similar outreaches to Armenia, sending seasonal greetings to the President Serzh Sargsyan at Christmas and for Gregorian New Year, and visited Iranian Armenian families in their homes at Christmas. He has made similar outreach to other minority communities in Iran, even wishing Iranian Jews well at Rosh Hashanna in 2013, and insisting that the term *aqaliyat* (minority) should be replaced with *Iranian-e gheir-e mosalman* (non-Muslim Iranians).⁴² This move has been mirrored by other members of his administration in dealing with Armenian organizations within Iran.⁴³ This is clearly an important area for public diplomacy.

A final note and equally fascinating aspect of Iranian foreign policy, and one that has continued under President Rouhani, is Tehran's repeated offers to act as a "neutral" mediator to solve the Karabagh dispute. Neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan have shown much enthusiasm for the offer, which they have both refused. As mentioned, Azerbaijan is always cautious when dealing with Iran because it perceives Iran as favoring Armenia. Baku also believes that Iranian companies are conducting business in Karabagh.⁴⁴ Armenia has also rejected the offers, owing to its preference for Russian mediation on the issue.⁴⁵

Ultimately, Armenia and Azerbaijan remain at war and the conflict occasionally looks like it will spiral back into a full military confrontation. Fatal clashes between Azerbaijani and Armenian soldiers took place in late July and early August 2014, leading to fears—especially in Iran—that another war was imminent. Iran's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Marzieh Afkham, made Iran's position clear by expressing regret and calling for an immediate diplomatic solution. Importantly, she noted that Azerbaijan could not resolve the dispute

militarily given that violence had achieved nothing for Baku in the 25 years and much had been lost.⁴⁶ The Iranian media tends to be fairly balanced on reporting the Karabagh conflict in that they describe both sides' positions regarding the conflict.⁴⁷

Conclusion

In November 2014, President Rouhani reciprocated Aliyev's state visit by traveling to Baku. The meeting was considered symbolic but important by much of the international media, who understood it to be a sign of improvement in their relationship. It did show that President Rouhani and Dr. Zarif had made progress in their endeavors to engage with this neighbor, but the lack of any meaningful agreement between these two countries during these state visits shows that full normalization is a long way off. These encounters do prove one of the central points about Iranian foreign policy—that Iran is willing to be pragmatic, in this case with the ally of a sworn enemy, to achieve its policy objectives.

The question remains as to whether Iran's diplomatic engagements with Azerbaijan can be successful if the Islamic Republic is still perceived as favoring Armenia in the Karabagh conflict. In practice, however, this perception poses a smaller problem than the relationships both countries have with the United States. Azerbaijan's alignment with the United States will continue to place greater limitations on its interactions with Iran as long as Tehran and Washington continue to see one another as enemies. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the nature of both governments—religious Iran and nationalistic Azerbaijan—presents the greatest challenge to the relationship in the longer term. President Aliyev does not want religious groups challenging his authority, and successive Iranian leaders have complained about the threat Azerbaijani nationalism poses to the territorial integrity of the Islamic Republic.

By contrast, Iran's support for Armenia is one of convenience, and despite some shared history, it is often difficult for Iran to feel as close to Armenia as it does to Azerbaijan. The risk for Armenia is not an improvement of Iran–Azerbaijan ties. Instead, if Iran's relations with the United States normalize, Yerevan will lose much of its relevance as an ally. If, however, the distance between Tehran and Washington increases further, then Armenia will remain strategically important. The comments of former Soviet Premier Mikhail

Gorbachev that the Ukraine War was leading to the creation of a new Eastern Bloc was interpreted by some in Iran as an opportunity to develop a new non-aligned movement, as the Islamic Republic was being pushed by American policies closer to Russia by the sanctions.⁴⁸ If this situation were to develop, then in the near future, Armenia will continue to foster warm relations with Tehran, while Azerbaijan remains at odds.

Finally, the ongoing stalemate and considerable threat of war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabagh remains a constant irritant in Iran's relations with these nations. Iran's stance as a neutral neighbor willing to assist with negotiations is not taken at face value in either Baku or Yerevan, and both countries want Tehran to keep its distance. Nevertheless, this problem does not present any significant problem for Rouhani's engagement with Armenia, whose leadership has by and large been satisfied with the Islamic Republic on most matters. It is hard to ascertain how successful Rouhani will be in engaging Azerbaijan, however. Baku has no incentive to give up its relations with the United States, while Yerevan remains a staunch ally of Iran's nuclear program. Therefore, it is the outcome of negotiations over this program that remains Rouhani and Zarif's number one foreign policy objective, as they see it as the key to opening all other future engagements with their neighborhood.

Notes

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CHAPTER 5

The UAE and Iran: The Different Layers of a Complex Security Issue

William Guéraiche

The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as a force in northern Iraq and Syria has shed new light on the “Iranian issue” in the world in general and in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in particular. Just a few weeks before the June 29, 2014, establishment of the group’s self-proclaimed Caliphate, cooperation between Iran and the United States seemed out of reach if not unbelievable. However, virtually overnight, ten years of war rhetoric almost vanished, transforming the Republic of the Mullahs into a suitable partner in the regional security setting. Most of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries meanwhile reshuffled their priorities. The danger of radical Islam from Tunisia to Iraq has superseded the fear of a Shi’a expansion around the Gulf. In this blurred regional context, the leaders of the region have sent mixed messages. Diplomatic activity increased in late 2013 between the UAE, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, and the Islamic Republic, surprising international observers. On January 13, 2014, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai and Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE, called on the international community to lift the sanctions against Iran, stating that Iran was a neighbor. He remarked, “we” have no problem with the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI).¹ Whether he was referring to the UAE or the international community the message was unclear. Thus, while the United States claims to have mobilized a united front against Iran, local state actors such as the UAE or substate

actors such as the government of Dubai had a different perspective on Gulf security and its allies.

The election of Hassan Rouhani in June 2013 contributed to resetting the regional background. The new president was no newcomer on the regional political scene, at least in the UAE. Indeed, Rouhani headed Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) from October 1989 to August 2005 and was therefore one of the key actors in the security discussions in the Gulf region. Prior to the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, for instance, he visited the highest officials in Abu Dhabi in early June 2005 to reassure the Emirates about the Islamic Republic's nuclear program.² Rouhani's diplomatic skills and knowledge of the security issues in the Gulf region made him a perfect candidate to erase the unease with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states (especially Saudi Arabia) that was generated by his predecessor. Rouhani's new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, heralded a change in the IRI foreign policy when he toured the Peninsula, with the exception of the Wahhabi Kingdom. Saudi Arabia remained confrontational with the IRI. Zarif declared in Kuwait City on December 1, 2013, that the Islamic Republic was ready to cooperate toward peace and stability in the region. Three days later, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the President of the UAE, accepted an invitation from Zarif to visit Tehran. However, it remained to be seen how far Iran and the UAE were willing to go to renew a dialogue against the new regional and international backdrop.

A dual approach is required to examine the relations between the two countries. On the one hand, regional issues are intermingled with the role (and the perception) of Iran in the world, particularly as a response to how the United States reacted to the nuclear program. On the other hand, the political moves have resulted both from long-term entrenched structures, such as trade between the Arab and the Persian cities around the Gulf, and short-term decisions resulting from the personal agendas of the leaders in the region. Thus, to determine whether Hassan Rouhani's policy of engagement significantly changes the relationship between Iran and the UAE, the long and complex history between the two countries must be explored.

As is customary in Geopolitics, an analysis of the relations between the UAE and Iran should start with the way the people of the two rims of the Gulf refer to each other. The discipline considers the local mind-sets as the first determining layer of a complex security issue. In fact,

defining Sheikh Mohammed's "we" may serve as the preliminary step to gauge the depth and quality of the relationship between the two countries, given that the multinational face and culture of Dubai, for instance, is in part due to a long history of migration and assimilation with its Persian neighbor. Historically, there has been a mutual distrust between the Arabs and the Persians as their own textbooks show. Arab textbooks depict the Persians as developing a "national" culture and favoring the split of the *ummah*,³ while Persian texts convey the idea that the Arabs are barbaric, particularly in light of the seventh century conquest.⁴ These representations are consistent with the increasing tension between the IRI and its neighbors on the nuclear issue in the mid-2000s. While there have been disputes with the UAE, a long shared history of exchanges serves as a counterbalance to the overall hostility that the international media has sought to portray.

Territorial and Nuclear Disputes

When Rouhani was inaugurated on August 4, 2013, there were at least two major bones of contention between the UAE and Iran. The first is a dispute dating back more than 40 years, prior to the Federation's independence, when Iranian troops invaded Abu Musa and the Greater and the Lesser Tunbs (often called the two Tunbs), off the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah. Iran's nuclear program under President Ahmadinejad reinstated topical interest in the conflict between the "eternal enemies."

Since the first years of UAE independence, the Iranian invasion of the three Emirati islands has tainted the amicable relations between Iran and the UAE. The origins of the sensitive topic date back to the late 1960s. On January 4, 1968, Harold Wilson, the then-British Prime Minister, announced that no troops of Her Majesty would remain in the Lower Gulf by January 1, 1972. At that time, the Shah of Iran wished to transform his country into a regional power in the Gulf and the Middle East. After Bahrain escaped Iran's expansionist agenda, the three Emirati islands appeared a suitable contingency plan. Before Independence, the emirate of Sharjah had sovereignty over Abu Musa and the Greater and the Lesser Tunbs, which were small, but rich in oil and fishing resources and strategically located at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz. The discussion between the last Pahlavi and Sheikh Khalid Mohammad Qawasim, ruler of Sharjah, resulted in the signing of a memorandum of understanding on November 29, 1971. The deal allowed the stationing of Iranian troops in the north of Abu

Musa, while Sharjah controlled the village in the south. Fishermen were to share the fishing resources. However, Iranian troops invaded the three islands the following day. The new federation was created on December 2, 1971, taking over Sharjah's rights, and the UAE, supported by the Arab states and the Western powers, has since denounced the illegal occupation of the three islands in vain.⁵ The policy regarding the islands as defined by Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the first president of the Federation and his successor, his son, Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, has always been unambiguous: this dispute should be peacefully resolved.

The election of Hassan Rouhani did not alter the dispute. Specifically, neither the Iranian nor the Emirati leaders have room to maneuver. Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the current UAE Foreign Minister, illustrated the continuity of the policy in the UN General Assembly on September 29, 2013. After emphasizing the principles of the federation's foreign policy, Sheikh Abdullah called for the restoration of the Emirati rights over Abu Musa and the two Tunbs. He welcomed the attitude of the new Iranian president, implying that Hassan Rouhani would be more willing than his predecessor to negotiate the retrocession of the islands. Sheikh Abdullah concluded that the UAE sincerely wants to promote security, stability, and prosperity in the region.⁶ Emirati newspapers continue to regularly report on the government's endeavor to recover the islands. In fact, the Emirati and the greater Arab public opinion expect the federal government to maintain the pressure to restore sovereignty over the islands. In January 2014, rumors spread that the two countries were working toward an agreement through the mediation of Oman, and Iran would surrender two of the islands.⁷ However, no leader or authority at federal or local levels echoed what might be a "compromise" on the "occupied" islands. Interestingly, even if the Emirati public opinion did not express its discontent, the Arab League Ministerial Council reiterated the Emirati sovereignty over the islands on March 11. This was underscored two weeks later with a statement on the 27th following the two-day Arab Summit held in Kuwait City: Abu Musa and the two Tunbs still remain contested. The islands remain core public opinion and diplomatic issues for the governments of the two countries. For Iranian and Emirati decision makers, staying in line with a categorical statement on the sovereignty of the islands is the simplest option.

In order to facilitate the recovery of the three islands, the UAE used the Iranian nuclear program—its second bone of contention—to

strengthen its position. The nuclear program started under the last Shah of Iran and was interrupted after the 1979 Iranian revolution. The issue re-emerged in the 2000s and was ostensibly put back on the agenda after the election of the conservative president Ahmadinejad in 2005. This new turn of events was worrisome for the GCC states. On January 21, 2006, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and deputy supreme commander of the UAE Armed Forces, stated that the program threatened the Gulf as a whole and that the federation was therefore firmly opposed to the completion of the project.⁸ The UAE's disapproval of the enterprise emphasized the risks of an accident for the civilian population on the other rim of the Gulf. Indeed, after the Chernobyl and Fukushima disasters, this threat gained some credence.⁹

However, during the escalation that led to the United Nations sanctions in June 2010, the UAE government kept by and large a moderate stance on the nuclear issue. Four years prior to this turning point, after the UN Security Council had passed Resolution 1696 demanding that Iran halt all forms of uranium enrichment and related activities, Abu Dhabi sought to draw a line between itself and the aggressive rhetoric its Western and Arab allies. Sheikh Abdullah Al Nahyan announced that the UAE considered the Iranian program well intentioned. In line with Emirati foreign policy, the UAE would maintain direct negotiations with their neighbor in the Gulf.¹⁰ Seen from the Federation's perspective, this was a diplomatic stance that created a distance from the US coalition in the UN eager to take sanctions against the IRI¹¹ even if no specific statement was made after the passing of Security Council Resolution 1737, which was an unyielding move devised to freeze Iranian assets abroad. True to the Federation's foreign policy, and against the international mainstream, the Emirati Minister of Foreign Affairs went to Tehran to reaffirm the two countries' friendship two weeks later.¹² In striking contrast to international propaganda escalating against the IRI, the relations between Abu Dhabi and Tehran were improving. The first official visit of an Iranian president to the Federation on May 13–14, 2007, illustrated this rapprochement between the two countries. Ahmadinejad expressed his appreciation of the UAE's "balanced" policy in the midst of an international cabal against Iran. During 2007–2008, Iran and the UAE deepened their cooperation in many fields, especially in economics.¹³ Nevertheless, the tensions never completely disappeared. For instance, on September 30, 2007, Sheikh Abdullah launched another diplomatic

offensive in his address at the UN General Assembly and a succession of events gave the impression that there was little friendship between the two countries. In August 2008, the UAE denounced the opening of two Iranian bureaus in Abu Musa (a sea emergency center and a registry office for ships and sailors), accusing Iran of trespassing on the disputed islands. For their part, a few weeks later, the Iranians protested against the ill treatment of their nationals upon entering the UAE. However, at the higher level, officials wanted to ease tensions.¹⁴

All these contradictory statements have presented an advantage. Outsiders, such as Western journalists, experts, or diplomats, could select events that portray either party as the aggressor or the culprit. One may venture to say that the ambiguity of these signals was deliberate. Beyond a doubt, the UAE stood firm on the sovereignty of the islands, as did Iran. However, the underlying significance, scope, and direction of the dispute between the Emirates and its northern neighbor remained to be seen.

Different Scales of Analysis: Dubai, the UAE, and the GCC

Understanding the relationship between the UAE and Iran poses the issue of the right scale of analysis. Indeed, the national scale, the UAE vs. Iran, seems an obvious approach. Yet, the Federation, by definition, is a collection of seven emirates, each characterized by an individual historical and cultural response and approach to its neighbor. When the “national” or “federal” level imposes itself in the media, local governments have often been reluctant to concede their own rights and perspectives, as embodied in the Emirati constitution. In practice, the Sheikhs have retained their authority over the population living in their emirates. In addition, while Article 120 of the constitution states that the Federation has exclusive jurisdiction in foreign affairs, Article 123 points out that an emirate “may conclude limited conventions of a local and administrative nature with neighboring countries” under certain conditions.¹⁵ This statute was conceived so that the local rulers could maintain relations with other states at their discretion. In this regard, historically speaking, the two emirates that have had a long history of relations, friendly and antagonistic alike, with Iran are Ras Al Khaimah and Dubai. In addition, the seven emirates have different weights in Emirati affairs. Leading the federation is Abu Dhabi, sitting on 90 billion of barrels of oil (proven reserves). Its main contender,

in second place, is Dubai. While the two main emirates agree on the guidelines of the Federation, their leaders seem to have had different perspectives on Iran.

Despite the lack of official statistics, Iranians and the Emiratis from Iranian origins, or *ajami* (etymologically “illiterate,” or those who do not read Arabic), total approximately 400,000 in the emirate of Dubai alone. According to Christopher Davidson, there were a number of different stages of migration. When the pearling industry declined in the 1920s, Persian merchants crossed the Gulf to benefit from a friendly business environment. The overflow of Iranian politics, from state centralization under the Pahlavi until the Iranian revolution, maintained a steady influx of migration to the city. Davidson added that a notable proportion of entrepreneurs and officials belong to this *ajami* community. Whereas some might have kept their religious beliefs and practices, prosaically Shi’ism, the ruling family of Dubai, the Maktoum, did not persecute or ostracize them.¹⁶

From the 1990s onward, the rich legacy of migrations across the Gulf paved the way for economic and intercultural exchange. The end of the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) preceded the collapse of the USSR. Before the invasion of Kuwait, Central Asia emerged as a potential regional market whose center of gravity would have been Iran. This new geopolitical setting accentuated the commerce between Dubai and Iran. The year the war ended in the Gulf, the emirate imported \$107 million worth of goods from the Republic and re-exported (goods that transit through the UAE) \$188 million. Five years later, exports doubled and re-exports tripled. 20 percent of the country’s imports were eventually re-exported to Iran.¹⁷ The strategy of Dual Containment defined by Clinton’s administration looked ominous for the future of this market. After Operation Desert Storm, the United States tried to keep Iraq under pressure and Iran as well, whose position regarding the Strait of Hormuz was perceived as continuously troublesome. Against all odds, Dubai not only sustained its strong position in the Iranian market, which it developed further. In this regard, the pragmatism that characterized the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997) struck a responsive chord in the UAE. The relationship reached a new level as the economies of Dubai and the UAE boomed in the 2000s.¹⁸ According to the statistics released by the Emirati National Bureau of Statistics, nonoil commerce doubled between the Federation and Iran during the decade: in 2004, total commerce amounted to \$4,746 billion, and by 2010, it had reached

\$10,449 billion.¹⁹ The same year, re-exports from the UAE represented more than 80 percent of the UAE's total trade with Iran. This overwhelming proportion of re-export activity is a clear indication that most of the goods transited through Dubai, as was confirmed by Dubai Customs.²⁰ In 2002, total commerce between Dubai and Iran amounted to \$3,535 billion; in 2006, it more than doubled to reach \$7,705 billion. This breakdown of the trade reveals its nature. Indeed, more than half of the goods were re-exported from Dubai (\$2,015 billion in 2002 and \$4,018 billion in 2006). Because of the sanctions, Dubai had therefore been a hub, vital for the Iranian economy.

Despite the veneer of bilateral tension, it seems that Dubai maintained its commercial relations with its northern neighbor, with the business community continuing to circumvent the US embargo. The *sine qua non* condition was to keep these commercial activities as discreet as possible. The newspapers sometimes released information hinting at the strong business relations between the two rims of the Gulf. By 2005, there were seemingly 2,000 "Iranian" companies and shops (likely owned either by Iranian citizens or Emiratis of Persian origin) in Dubai.²¹ Some journalists claimed that this data released by the Emirati authorities underestimated the volume of the exchange. Whereas the total trade officially amounted to around \$5 billion between Iran and the UAE in the mid-2000s, a number generated both by the National Bureau of Statistics and by Dubai Customs, the figure could easily have reached \$13 billion in reality. A significant part of the total commerce stemmed from contraband trade, favored by the proximity of the UAE and Iran, measuring between 50 and 150 km across the Strait of Hormuz. Therefore, this trade was at least one-third and likely half of the total commerce. Whereas public opinion maintains a certain poetic representation of "smuggling," the reality is that the volume traded necessitated officials turning a blind eye to new illegal commercial methods.²² Moreover, Dubai's traditional *dhow*s stationed in Deira, on the right bank of the creek may seem the best method to smuggle goods to and from Iran, but realistically, the scale of the contraband trade ensured that trade was not confined to such limited vessels of commerce. Indeed, it must have also included the free zones. American goods, despite the embargo, were certainly part of the trafficking. The Emirati authorities planned to enforce naval patrols.²³ Yet, given the coastal features and the intense maritime activity in the Gulf, the best option was just to shrink this contraband trade. Both governments claimed that they would cooperate on this issue.²⁴

Commerce between the UAE and the United States doubled between 2004 and 2007 and tripled in 2008.²⁵ One-third of the American goods were re-exported and reached Iran as a destination on the dhows or by containers from Jebel Ali or Port Rashid. US authorities may have turned a blind eye to this illegal commerce because it generated revenues for American companies. It goes without saying that the Emirati and Iranian authorities also knew what was taking place.

From a business point-of-view, the UAE's moderate attitude toward Iran made sense. But, it does not mean that all Emiratis accepted the loophole. In fact, some expected harsher policies against IRI. One might easily imagine that the government of Dubai exerted pressure on the federal government to slow down the implementation of international sanctions. The long-term and friendly history between Dubai and Iran therefore impacted federal foreign policy, as the international condemnation of the IRI strengthened the links with Dubai.²⁶ Commercial relations between Dubai and Iran became a diplomatic asset for the federation as a whole. Iran has had no reason to treat the UAE and Dubai badly, and negotiations on the model of the Omani dialogue, have always been possible. That said, the international context changed in the late 2000s with the economic decline and more stringent sanctions passed by the international community.

The United States, in Between Dubai and Iran

After President Ahmadinejad's official visit to Abu Dhabi on May 13–14, 2007, relations between the UAE and Iran blossomed. This diplomatic growth was cut short, however, due to US attempts to drive a wedge between the neighbors and isolate Iran. The United States tightened its grip on the Federation at the end of the Bush administration and the beginning of Obama's first term. Nevertheless, the Emirates did not undertake a major change in policy regarding Iran. Additionally, the new US administration may have been less inclined to enforce its position after the signing of the nuclear contract between the UAE and South Korea in December 2008. During that year, the United States had competed with Canada, France, Japan, Russia, and South Korea for the Emirati contract (\$40 billion in total).

US officials, however, launched a campaign to undermine the peaceful relations between the federation and Iran from 2008 until 2010. Stuart Levey was Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence in the Bush administration and remained in the position

under Barack Obama. He traveled twice to Abu Dhabi in 2008, first in February and then in November. In the span of seven months, his attitude became firmer on matters of financial and commercial arrangements in an attempt to strengthen the isolation of Iran. He boldly declared during his November visit that a new challenge laid ahead for the UAE, because the personal ties between the Federation and Iran were not independent of international security issues. After naming shipping companies and banks, he warned that the US administration was watching: "We think it is not a good time to pursue businesses with Iran."²⁷ The message was clear but the UAE did not immediately respond. Even when the main concern for the international public opinion in late 2008 was the global economic depression that halted Dubai's boom, the Obama administration exerted more pressure to isolate Iran. The Emirates was mentioned as a transit country for illegal goods, especially after the United States did not win the bid for the nuclear contract.²⁸ The debate over new sanctions against Iran in 2009–2010 was the turning point of this political arm-wrestling. The Americans needed a united front against Iran, and the new US president could not afford to leave the Emiratis, primary allies in the region, room to maneuver. The economic depression had deeply affected Dubai at the time, contributing to the Federation's sense of its diminishing leverage on the Iranian issue. In any case, for both Abu Dhabi and Dubai, a good international reputation had been instrumental in their economic development. Suspicion of Emirati complicity on Iran would further harm the cities' overall credibility on the international stage. Then-US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, went on a diplomatic mission to Abu Dhabi on March 11, 2010, seeking the support of the Arab leaders, and meeting with Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and the deputy supreme commander of the UAE armed forces. During discussions, Gates (who had also been the Secretary of Defense under Bush) pushed for measures to be taken against Iranian firms doing business in the UAE.²⁹

By the time the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1929 on June 9, 2010, the UAE had come into line with the US policy of isolation and further sanctions against Iran. The Dubai business community involved with Iranian commerce was worried, but tried to downplay the effects of the sanctions.³⁰ Some managers probably intended to circumvent the new set of measures as they had done beforehand. Aware of this rampant attitude of defiance, in August

2010, Stuart Levey toured in the Gulf to explain how the Arab states were supposed to apply the sanctions. As the banking sector was under the US microscope, Abdul Rahim Mohamed Al Awadi, Executive Director of the UAE Central Bank and head of the Anti-Money Laundering and Suspicious Cases Unit (AMLSCU), sought to reassure that all UN resolutions against Iran would be implemented. The Emirati Central Bank announced that it would take action against the 40 companies that assisted in Iran's nuclear program.³¹ For those businesses, the die was cast and it was only a matter of time before all Emirati companies would have to comply with international sanctions. In May 2011, James Steinberg, US Deputy Secretary of State, pointed at the UAE-based Royal Oyster Group and the UAE-Iranian Sepahan Company, which supplied refined oil to the Iranians.³² In June, the US departments of Finance and Justice accused six Emirati shipping and transit companies of engaging in illegal trade with Iran. In 2011 and 2012, US scrutiny of commercial and banking institutions was inescapable. Noor Islamic Bank announced on March 1, 2012, that it had stopped dealing with Iranian banks in December 2011. At the same time, HSBC revealed that it faced civil and criminal prosecution in the United States for dealing with Iranian clients.³³ Regardless of the business opportunities that Iran presented UAE financial institutions, the news made clear that the United States had the upper hand on the Iranian issue and, therefore, the corresponding global market.

Does this US victory mean that Dubai and the UAE have paid the indirect consequences of Iran's isolation? International sanctions harmed the commercial relations between the two rims of the Gulf but did not stop relations altogether. The sanctions passed by the international community largely concerned military equipment and economic activities aligned with the nuclear program. Consequently, nothing has prevented the merchants from trading authorized goods with the Persian state. Nonetheless, the overall atmosphere of suspicion, the cumbersome procedures required by the banking sector, and the mandatory administrative red tape have hindered economic exchange. Sympathetic to the lament of the merchant population, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum received a merchant delegation in June 2010, but there was little he could do.³⁴ In fact, upon accepting the embargo resolutions, Dubai's government sought new business opportunities in South America, Central Asia, and even Europe on an official level. However, Dubai's traders appeared less interested in new markets, with statistics showing that the mercantile

community maintained a steadfast position against this unfriendly business environment. According to Dubai Exports, exports and re-exports to Iran amounted to \$6 billion in 2010, making Iran the second largest trading partner for re-export after India.³⁵ However, the Americans quoted data that contradicted the optimism of business officials. In early November 2013, John Kerry visited Abu Dhabi to discuss the Iranian nuclear issue. He noted that the UAE had paid a great price by abiding by the international sanctions. Without mentioning sources or a timeframe, the Secretary of State stated that business had markedly decreased from \$23 to \$4 billion between the two countries.³⁶ This decrease in commercial trade was recently confirmed by Dubai Customs: total commerce had plunged from \$9.80 billion in 2011 to just \$6.81 billion in 2012.³⁷

The Ascent of President Rouhani

After the election of Hassan Rouhani, officials and business people were ready to resume economic activity with the IRI. While Iranian diplomats negotiated in Vienna on the nuclear program, the new president had to be careful with regard to the GCC states, especially Saudi Arabia. In December 2013, Foreign Minister Zarif's tour of multiple Gulf States instilled hope of change in the small monarchies. Because of its historical and political links, Oman was at the forefront of Rouhani's new policy toward the Arabian Peninsula. Oman's Sultan Qaboos was the first foreign leader to visit the new president after he took office in August 2013. The Iranian president used the concept of Islamic solidarity to explain his new policy during his official visit to Muscat in March 2014. Cultivating his image of a moderate and tolerant leader, he stated that "Relations with Islamic countries and particularly neighboring countries are of extraordinary importance for us." It is important to note that the two states cooperate on energy issues, notably, the finalization of a gas pipeline whose completion is planned for 2017.³⁸ After this temperate move to broach the GCC, it was easier for other states such as the UAE to follow in the Sultanate's footsteps.

The UAE revived its strategy of bilateral relations anchored in the UAE–Iran joint committee. These committees had a certain fervor before the Arab Spring and intended to counterbalance the influence of the Saudi Kingdom on its neighbors. As a matter of fact, a joint committee between the two states already existed—after Ahmadinejad's state visit in May 2007, a memorandum of understanding formalized

a committee on October 29, 2008. Although rising tensions in the Gulf slowed down the committee's activity, it held its sixth meeting on October 11, 2011.³⁹ When Sheikh Abdullah, the UAE Foreign Minister, paid a visit to Hassan Rouhani in Tehran on November 28, 2013, the two states revived the structure. Beyond the official statement emphasizing the positive relations between the two countries and ways to strengthen them, the meeting marked a shift. Sheikh Abdullah not only wished success to the new government⁴⁰ but also mentioned the economic joint committee between Iran and the UAE.⁴¹ After attending another joint committee in Kuwait City on December 2, Zarif met Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan at Al Rawda Palace in Al Ain. The Iranian Foreign Minister reiterated his formal invitation for a state visit to Tehran, to which the president of the Federation agreed.⁴² The experts in the field immediately understood the Iranian move. As Khaled Al Dhakil, a Saudi political analyst, pointed out: "Tehran is trying to create a wedge between Saudi Arabia and some GCC states like Oman and Qatar."⁴³ The business community received the message with delight. The volume of commercial exchanges, especially foodstuff, increased in late 2013. Against this backdrop, the interview given to the *BBC* by Sheikh Mohammed, calling for the alleviation of the sanctions against Dubai's economic partner, promoted the possibility that the US sanctions might come to an end.⁴⁴ As economic preoccupations and political sanctions go hand in hand, by February 2014, US officials worried about this change in the Gulf's dynamic with Iran. Leading global oil companies, trading firms, and banks were preparing to negotiate lucrative deals with the Republic. David S. Cohen, Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, alerted the impatient commercial partners: "Anyone who is contemplating doing business with Iran should be extraordinary careful because of the extensive and complicated sanctions that are still in place."⁴⁵ But the Americans were overwhelmed by the eagerness of the business community to resume its exchanges with Iran. On April 15, 2014, Zarif met with Sheikh Mohammed who agreed to make another official visit to Tehran. The previous day, a session of the UAE-Iran joint committee had taken place in Abu Dhabi. As usual, the content of the discussion was not disclosed, but newspapers reported that a broad range of issues in the energy, trade, investments, and cultural sectors were discussed.

During the closing ceremony, the two Ministers of Foreign Affairs assessed the relations between Iran and the UAE as neighborly and

positive. Sheikh Abdullah praised President Rouhani's recent policy of friendly engagement with the GCC, a turning point that would be beneficial for both states. He confirmed that the joint committee was the cornerstone of their relations, paving:

...the way for more cooperation between our countries in order to achieve joint interests, taking into consideration both sides' commitment to international regulations and looking forward for wider horizons where many obstacles can be removed, those which hinder trade, economic, cooperation and investment exchange.⁴⁶

This "wider horizon" implied by the Emirati Minister of Foreign Affairs could include the UAE gaining access to the Central Asian market. In addition, from a geopolitical point of view, the UAE is better located than any other Arab state to accompany the Iranians in the global market, in as much as Iran lacks a world-class shipping infrastructure. For instance, the Iranians are likely to use Port Rashid, Jebel Ali in Dubai, and Port Khalifa in the emirate of Abu Dhabi. For his part, Zarif perfectly summed up the spirit of the new collaboration between the Emirates and Iran: "What we share in this region is far bigger than what could divide us."⁴⁷

Conclusion

The context has changed since 2013. The election of Hassan Rouhani contributed to the diminishing tensions in the Gulf. Beyond his personal impetus, the new president also benefited from a combination of circumstances, the most significant of which was the emergence of ISIL as a serious threat to Iraqi Kurdistan. All things considered, this evolution toward a rapprochement between UAE and Iran is not unexpected. Indeed, the policy of isolation did not destroy the ties that have bound Arabs and Persians for millennia, but merely strained them temporarily. In the history of the two countries, 2010–2013 could be interpreted as the era of temporary American interference in the deeply rooted partnership between Iran and the UAE.

Paradoxically, the main question in the issue between "the UAE" and Iran remains the divergent relationships between the different emirates of the federation and their Persian neighbor. While emirates such as Dubai, Ras Al Khaimah, and Fujairah have exploited regional economic opportunities, the emirate of Abu Dhabi appears to hold

a different stance. Seen from Abu Dhabi, Iran is first and foremost a Shi'ite country whose underground activity has undermined the power of the ruling families in the Gulf states. In the wake of the Arab Spring and the tensions that culminated in the demonstrations in Bahrain in March 2011, the (local) government of Abu Dhabi might have been tempted to contain Iran's influence on the Arabian coast of the Gulf.

However, the April 2, 2015, nuclear framework agreement between Iran and the six world powers in Lausanne (Switzerland) was welcomed with enthusiasm in Dubai. Even before the final agreement was reached in July, 2015, the business community was already preparing to exploit the commercial opportunities of the Iranian market and, beyond, of Central Asia. However, it must not be forgotten that Iranian and Emirati public opinion on the claims of sovereignty of Abu Musa and the two Tunbs could always modify the alchemy of the two sides of the Gulf, regardless of the otherwise firm relationship.

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CHAPTER 6

How Foreign Is the Kurdish Issue in Iran's Foreign Policy?

Costas Laoutides

Introduction

The evolution of the Kurdish political agenda in Iraq, Turkey, and Syria has refueled the discussion about the future of the Kurds in the Middle East. The prospect of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq along with the creation of a Kurdish enclave in Syria and the ongoing unofficial peace talks between Kurds in Turkey and the Turkish government has generated a number of challenges for Iran, which has its own share of Kurdish grievance and mobilization. This jigsaw puzzle has become more perplexed by the presence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) group in parts of Syria and Iraq, which poses a major security threat to the region's populations.

Although Iran follows a pragmatic approach toward the Kurds in Iraq by adopting the logic of cooperation and exchange, it follows a more ideologically informed policy when it comes to the Kurdish populations at home, which is largely based on the denial of minority or autonomy status. The Kurdish issue presents a paradox for Iran as it tests the boundaries of the inside/outside division of Iranian foreign policy. It is a call for the maximization of state security without compromising the revolutionary character of the regime. Simultaneously, it presents the challenge of dealing with a problem that transcends traditional lines of foreign policy formation. The election of Hassan Rouhani to the presidency of Iran has been received in a positive light with regard to the Kurdish issue; so far he has employed the language

of moderation and inclusiveness at home as well the language of cooperation and pragmatism abroad. This chapter outlines the Kurdish question in Iran including its current state under Rouhani, discusses Iranian foreign policy and the way it has come to terms with the question of the Kurds in the region, and finally concludes with a projection about the future policy of Iran against the Kurds, highlighting the significance of the issue for Iran's domestic and regional policy.

The Kurds in Iran

Iran's Kurds have quite a distinct history. For a long time, they were part of the multiracial Persian Empire, and therefore, the question of joining any putative post-Ottoman Kurdish state was never an issue. Resembling to an extent the case in Turkey, the Reza Shah period was characterized by the suppression of Kurdish claims to autonomy in an attempt to impose central authority and homogeneity in the Iranian state.¹ Following the defeat and death of the most prominent Kurdish rebel Ismail Agha Simko in 1929,² the Kurds in Iran were relatively quiet until the Second World War when the short-lived Republic of Mahabad was created in 1946 under the Presidency of Qazi Muhammad.³ The Republic offered Iran's Kurds a fleeting illusion of autonomy as the new-fangled entity, a significant moment for the embryonic Kurdish national narrative, which lasted for only one year.⁴

However, the Republic of Mahabad and the years that led to its establishment marked the beginning of the political organization of the Kurdish movement in Iran. In 1942, *Komalay Jiyanaway Kurdistan* (Society for the Revival of Kurdistan) was founded, but remained underground until it was disbanded in August 1945.⁵ The Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI or PDKI as it was known later)⁶ replaced *Komalay* in 1945 and became the main organization of the Kurdish cause. To this day, the political autonomy of the Kurds within Iranian borders remains its primary goal.⁷ It is a stable political goal that over time differentiated the Kurdish political struggle in Iran significantly from those in Iraq and Turkey, where claims for full-blown independent statehood were common.

After the fall of Mahabad and until the Islamic Revolution of 1979, a tight grip was kept on the Kurdish areas, meaning that aspirations for greater autonomy remained unfulfilled. The Revolution raised Kurdish hopes again, since it offered yet another opportunity for meaningful

autonomy. The Kurds were active in the demonstrations leading to the collapse of the Shah's regime with strong Kurdish nationalist sentiments being expressed in the immediate aftermath of the Shah's fall.⁸ However, Khomeini and the new ruling elite were concerned that the volatile transition period would endanger the territorial integrity of the country. The unrest and the outbreaks of violence in several minority regions in the early days of the Revolution were perceived as a peril of future disintegration.

For Khomeini's revolutionary government, the unity of Iran's Islamic community was central to its political agenda, and in this light, all Kurdish demands for autonomy were rejected.⁹ However, the government's failure to defeat the Kurds militarily in 1979 prompted another attempt at a negotiated settlement.¹⁰ However, the series of proposals and counterproposals between the rival parties highlighted the gap between their views *vis-à-vis* reaching political accommodation. By early 1980, the political impasse had led to the resumption of violence, with the KDPI demanding autonomy but not independence, and Khomeini maintaining that he was fighting separatists.¹¹ The postrevolutionary situation and rapid onset of the Iranian war with Iraq enabled the Kurds to exercise governmental powers over large areas of Iranian Kurdistan, but these gains soon turned to losses.¹² Iran gained vital ground in the Iran-Iraq battlefield, and Kurdish strongholds were taken over while internal dissension harmed the Kurdish cause.¹³ By the end of 1983, practically all of Kurdistan was in Tehran's control, although skirmishes continued. The KDPI, Komele, and other Kurdish groups were outlawed and went underground or moved their headquarters to Iraq, Turkey, and countries in the West. A further blow to the Kurdish cause in Iran came with the assassination of the leaders of KDPI, Dr. Abdul Rahman Qasimlu and Dr. Sadiq Sharafkandi, in 1989 and 1992, respectively, by agents of the Iranian government.¹⁴

These unpromising events were the prelude to a difficult period for Iranian Kurdistan, which by 1997 had become a totally militarized zone under the control of more than 200,000 troops.¹⁵ However, unlike Iraq or Turkey, Iran did not pursue a policy of ethnic cleansing, but opted for a strategy of targeted assassinations.¹⁶ State officials silenced opposition groups and arrested Kurdish nationalists, while simultaneously tolerated Kurdish cultural organizations, events, and certain publications. The official Iranian state nationalism continued to acknowledge the various people of Iran and their cultural traditions,

but denied any claim to distinct minority nations. This attitude has been explained as part of Iran's Islamic universalism, where the emphasis is placed on constructing an overarching identity across distinct communities within Iran based on common religion.¹⁷

In the aftermath of the Iran–Iraq war, there was a more open political atmosphere. Under President Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997), Iran underwent an economic recovery and reconnected with the international community. Rafsanjani's moderate path paved the way for the reformist movement, which promised a “return to normalcy” and led eventually to the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005).¹⁸ Khatami's early days were characterized by a response to the suppressed discontent of the previous era, especially in the Kurdish and other minority regions, with the promotion of a discourse on civil rights and civil society. Inclusive cultural and social policies, rhetorical moderation, and the prevalence of the rule of law as the foundation of Iran's political system was the triptych of Khatami's vision of an “Iran for all Iranians.”¹⁹ Under Khatami's agenda, the cultural and political space opened up allowing for the public discussion of sensitive issues in a fashion that was unknown to younger generations of Iranian Kurds. For the first time, Kurds were appointed to key positions in local and regional governments, while the flourishing of Kurdish media, publications, and cultural centers marked Khatami's new approach to the Kurdish question. However, although Iran experienced a more open political climate, Khatami's social and political base was not strong enough to support the realization of the promised transition. The right-wing conservative forces attached to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei opposed reforms, and they pulled Khatami back from his pro-Kurdish policies. The prospect of any meaningful reform for the Kurds in Iran diminished further after the hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected to presidency in June 2005.

The return of the conservatives in the presidency with Ahmadinejad's election signaled a return to the imposition of Persian-dominated policies, which was further fueled by the sectarian agenda that was increasingly adopted by the Iranian government.²⁰ The widespread arrest and execution of Kurds were at the epicenter of Ahmadinejad's strategy for national homogenization. This militarization of the political system affected the Kurds who had raised expectations after the “cultural approach” of the Khatami era. The changing political map in the Middle East as a result of the US-led war against Iraq reinvigorated Iran's Kurdish parties, which had been

in decline, and could now operate in exile from Iraqi Kurdistan. The Iranian Kurdish leaders hoped for a “regime change” in Iran in a similar fashion that their brethren experienced in Iraq. However, the change of the political regime did not eventuate, and the re-election of Ahmadinejad in 2009 intensified the climate of fear and persecution against the Kurds and other minority voices in the country.

The combination of raising Kurdish expectations, the increasing securitization of the Kurdish case by the Iranian state, and the disillusion of Iranian Kurds regarding their fragmented and inadequate leadership led to the emergence of new forms of civil disobedience and in some cases to new militancy in Iranian Kurdistan. This wave of resistance emanated from domestic and regional factors. On the one hand, the Khatami era had set a new ideological platform for an ethnically all-embracing Iran, which appealed to younger generations of Kurds. Responding to the increased oppression, some of the civil society organizations that emerged during the Khatami era continued to challenge the government's policies of discrimination and suppression, claiming recognition of Kurdish rights within the existing political and social system.²¹ On the other hand, the creation of the Kurdish Autonomous Region (KAR) in Iraq and the relatively successful precedent of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in Turkey set an example of an organizational movement that can mobilize and achieve its political aims for political recognition. As a result, the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK) was formed in 2004, imitating the organizational structure and military guerrilla tactics of the PKK, and posing as a dangerous security challenge for Iran.²² Gradually PJAK won support among the Kurds in Iran, across all different areas and sects who had lost faith in other major Kurdish parties.²³ The period until 2011, when an inconclusive ceasefire took place, was characterized by increased military activity by PJAK, with the Kurdish Regional Government's (KRG) support. It was met by a brutal and uncompromising Iranian response, which resulted in heavy casualties. In the aftermath of the ceasefire and until June 2013 when Hassan Rouhani was elected as the new President of Iran, the clashes between PJAK and Iranian security forces became sporadic and of limited intensity.

Rouhani's election in the presidency raised the hopes among the Iranian Kurds about a possible rapprochement between the new government and the Kurds *vis-à-vis* their ethnic identity question. Although Rouhani did not present a specific program on ethnic minorities other than a general commitment to cultural rights during

the electoral campaign, he received nearly 80 percent of the votes in the province of Kurdistan.²⁴ The arrival of Rouhani in the presidency came at a time when Iran was (and still is) at a historical crossroads with regard to the future of Iranian Kurds. The changing political map in the Middle East generated a paradox for Iran and the way it deals with the Kurdish question. The continuous success of KAR in northern Iraq along with the relative advancement of the Kurdish agenda both in Turkey and Syria, and the threatening presence of a *de facto* Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, call for a reconceptualization of the Kurdish issue at home and abroad by Iran.

Iranian Foreign Policy and the Kurds in the Region

The change of the ideological political framework from nationalism to Islam in postrevolution Iran has led to the dramatic enhancement of Iran's influence in the Middle East. Although Iranian foreign policy in the region has undergone various phases over the past thirty-five years, one of the dimensions that remained unaltered was an attempt to gain loyalty and establish some form of patronage with the Kurds living in Turkey and Iraq. This policy aimed at exercising control over any potential collaboration with the Kurds in Iran. In addition, controlling Kurdish populations in Iraq and Turkey conveyed strategic benefits to Tehran, who would use the Kurdish card as leverage to realize certain foreign policy goals.

During the Iran–Iraq war, Tehran's main aim was to defeat Iraq on the battlefield and to that end the support of the Kurdish revolt in Northern Iraq against Baghdad was instrumental.²⁵ Iran provided weaponry and financial support to the two Kurdish opposition groups in Iraq, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), in order to draw Iraqi troops away from the southern front where Iran hoped to break through to Basra and end the war victoriously. By assisting the Kurds in Iraq, Tehran was trying to cut off any assistance that the KDP and PUK were providing to the KDPI.²⁶ Iran's support to the Iraqi Kurds reached its apogee, when Tehran initiated a mediation process so as to end hostilities between PUK and KDP and to foster cooperation under a coalition in 1986.

As Gourlay discusses later in this volume, in the same period, the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey was launched by the PKK. Notwithstanding a security agreement which was signed between Iran and Turkey in 1984 and prohibited any activity within their borders that

threatened the security of the other, some PKK units operated along the porous Turkish–Iranian borders and used Iran as a basis for launching strikes against Turkey until the late 1990s. Thus, the ironic, and to a degree paradoxical, element of Iranian policy to the near abroad Kurds during that period was that, while it promoted their national aspirations in Turkey and Iraq, Tehran opted to frustrate and suppress Kurdish aspirations at home. This was even though the Iranian Kurds' ambitions were considerably more moderate by comparison.

In the aftermath of the Iran–Iraq war, Iran's pragmatic foreign policy *vis-à-vis* the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey was further enhanced by the two wars in Iraq and the neutral stance that Tehran adopted. The US initiative to curb Saddam Hussein's power after the Second Gulf War (1990) led to the *de facto* formation of a safe-haven in Iraqi Kurdistan, which gradually developed political and administrative structures resembling an autonomous entity. This development had a significant impact on Iran, since the question of the autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan and the prospect of establishing an independent Kurdish state is a major issue of geopolitical concern in the region. In the late 1990s, as part of Khatami's moderate foreign policy, there was increased cross-border exchange with visits of political and cultural delegations on both sides of the border. However, the relationship between Iran and the KRG during that period was not trouble-free. Kurds claimed that Iran often fanned intra-Kurdish rivalry in northern Iraq, especially given the existence of two zones of influence ruled by KDP and PUK, respectively, until 1998, when the two parties signed a US-brokered peace deal. In fact, as early as 1994, Iran was drawn into a proxy war with Turkey in the Kurdish Autonomous Region. While Ankara provided support to the KDP, Tehran backed the PUK, which had in turn aligned itself with the PKK.

The third Gulf War (2003) led by United States and Britain against Iraq, and the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime further enhanced Kurdish hopes for an independent Kurdistan in Iraq. This coincided with a shift in Iranian foreign policy, which followed a hardline approach as a response to the increased Islamophobia and Iranophobia that was cultivated by the United States and its allies. The countries in the region, including the Iraqi government in Baghdad, remained firm against the establishment of an independent Kurdistan. They were concerned that an independent Kurdistan in northern Iraq would lead to irredentism and the annexation of Kurdish-inhabited lands beyond the international borders of Iraq. To deter such a development, Iran

followed a rather complex regional policy toward the Kurds by distinguishing the case of Iraqi Kurds from that of the PKK in Turkey. In July 2004, Turkey and Iran signed a Memorandum of Understanding on intelligence and joint operations against Kurdish militants. Prior to this, the two countries, along with Iraq, had made various bilateral agreements to counter assault Kurdish separatist groups in their own lands by coordinating their efforts.²⁷ Ankara's long-standing goal was to curb the activities of the PKK, which often was operating from bases inside northern Iraq, while Iran was facing the challenge of PJAK.

The rapid change of the political scene in Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 war forced Iran to respond to the new realities on the ground by defining the new Iraq as a top priority of its foreign and security agenda. Tehran saw the benefits of the sectarian affinity with Iraq's Shi'ite leaders but simultaneously attempted to support and empower the Kurdish position at the national level with the aim to balance their interests through Shi'a political groups. Iranian foreign policy makers felt confident that this policy could be realized because of the historical relations with Iraqi Kurdish groups. The aim was two-fold, to maintain the territorial integrity of Iraq and to separate Tehran's relations with Iranian and Iraqi Kurds by controlling the former while enhancing ties and cooperation with the latter. Thus, Iran has not pursued any redrawing of the borders as this would lead to destabilization in Iraq and could trigger unpredicted developments that pose a direct threat to the stability of Iran *per se*. In addition, Tehran has collaborated with Iraq (and other countries, especially Turkey), in order to curb the military action of the Kurdish guerrillas—especially the PJAK's—activity.

Simultaneously, however, Iran has adopted a policy of improving trade relations with Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region. Iran and KAR have strengthened their economic ties since the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Trade and economic relations between KAR and Iran have grown considerably over the past fifteen years from US\$100 million in 2000 to over \$4 billion in 2014. Iran is the KAR's second biggest trade partner after Turkey, and Iranian officials stress the significance of Iraqi Kurdistan for bilateral trade relations and as a paragon for the economic reconstruction of Iraq at every opportunity. This has seen Tehran express its readiness to cooperate with KAR in order to expand their economic relations. In practice, Tehran has promoted a number of projects that would see increase in the volume of economic activity between the two regions, the most recent example of

Iran's readiness toward this direction is the agreement for the creation of a free trade zone in the town of Penjwen on the border between the Kurdistan region and Iran.²⁸

But strengthening economic ties is not the only method that Iran has employed to improve its relations with Iraqi Kurdistan. The significance of culture as a means of soft power to promote a foreign policy agenda has been stressed in the literature.²⁹ Cultural diplomacy has become a pivotal aspect of Iranian foreign policy in the region, especially since President Khatami introduced the "Dialogue among Civilizations."³⁰ The apparent economic-social deficiencies and political failures of Middle Eastern nation-states have brought Islam to the foreground of Iranian culture in the last decades. The concept that all people are equal before God and the spiritual dimension of Islamic politics as opposed to western capitalism have led to the reconceptualization of the notion of the global Islamic community. The Islamic Republic has been working intensely to promote Islam as the key cultural concept in forming the political and social life of all Muslims in the region.³¹

Iran adopted a two-fold strategy in order to unite all Muslims in the region; it has pursued an expansion of its influence very actively in regions with Shi'ite populations and kept a low profile in regions with strong Sunni presence, although it stresses the common elements between the different sects. In the first category, the Islamic Republic highlights the common destiny of the Shi'ites in Iran and in the region. By maintaining cultural offices in major cities, Tehran can organize cultural activities ranging from the establishment of hospitals (that address material need through cultural affiliation) to enabling pilgrimage exchanges between Shi'ite sacred places in Iran and abroad. Jenkins' discussion of Iran's *Bonyads* later in this volume provides a comprehensive analysis of these soft-power initiatives. Iran has capitalized on the oppression Shi'ites have experienced outside Iran and has presented itself as the liberator/guarantor of the existence of these populations, thus making its cultural and religious message appealing.³²

In other cases, however, Tehran has been instrumental in developing its cultural foreign policy based on the ethnic element, with relations often framed in terms of their shared culture and language. This strategy has been energetically employed with regard to the Kurds in Iraq. There is a close ethnic and cultural relationship between Iran and the Kurds, as the latter are a group within the Iranian family of ethnic groups. Their languages belong to either north-western

or south-western groups of Iranian languages, and they share common cultural elements of pre-Islamic history, myths, legends, tradition, and religion.³³ Iran has sought to utilize its historical and cultural connection with the Kurds in Iraq, especially after the end of the third Gulf War when the new Iraqi Federation was formed. Iran regularly draws on cultural commonalities such as the celebration of the Persian New Year Nowruz across the region. In March 2010, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad invited Iraqi President Jalal Talabani (former leader of PUK) to attend Tehran's Iranian New Year celebrations. While in Tehran for the festivities, Talabani met with Ahmadinejad, and proclaimed in perfect Persian the ties of friendship and brotherhood between people in the region.³⁴ Although the Kurds are predominantly Sunni and promote a secular lifestyle, they share the Iranian legacy in order to promote culturally a nation-building process. Iran through its "soft power" cultural policy has been instrumental in influencing the formation of the Kurdish national profile, despite the fact that it contradicts the overarching Islamic theme of its cultural foreign policy. Notwithstanding this, Iran is culturally a more attractive option to the Kurds than Turkey or Syria, and this is a major asset which can maximize Iran's influence in Iraqi Kurdistan and thus realize its long-term foreign policy goal of strengthening the links and cooperation with the Kurdish Autonomous Region. In addition, by drawing on close cultural links between Iran and the Kurds, Tehran has attempted to dismiss claims by Iranian Kurds based on distinct culture and ethnicity. The promotion of a common cultural space between the Kurds and Iran is the means to cancel any political movement based on distinct ethnic and cultural elements.

However, a number of developments since 2013 have noticeably affected Iran's policy toward the Kurds in the region. In early 2013, peace talks between the Turkish government and the PKK reconvened. In this context, the KRG is increasingly viewed as part of the solution, especially from the Turkish perspective that sees Iraqi Kurdistan as a potential ally in its effort to delegitimize PKK violence and encourage wider political accommodation for the Kurdish population in Turkey. Such a prospect has generated skepticism in Tehran given that the potential withdrawal of 4,000 PKK militants from Turkey may trigger joint PKK/PJAK operations in Iranian Kurdistan.

In addition, the civil war in Syria and the ongoing security challenges in Iraq have further perplexed the situation, with the evolution of ISIS. The religious orientation and the radicalism that characterizes

ISIS pose a direct threat to Iran's security, especially if combined with similar pressures that the country faces in its Eastern borders. These developments call for a careful reconsideration of Iran's relations with the Kurds in the region. The Kurdish issue constitutes a complex geopolitical problem; thus, in 2014 and as a result of the military advancement of ISIS and the ongoing political crisis in Baghdad, the KRG saw a historic opportunity to call for an independent Kurdistan in northern Iraq, which can be seen as a strong tool against ISIS.³⁵ To this end, and in order to cover the security vacuum from the withdrawal of Iraqi security forces, Kirkuk has been captured by Kurdish *peshmerga* and there has been pressure for a referendum on Kurdish independence—a prospect that was not welcome neither by Tehran, Ankara, Baghdad, or the West, as it could support separatist tendencies among the Iranian Kurds and would bolster the hardliners in the PKK–Ankara negotiations.

Although Iran's strategic aim over the past fifteen years was to distinguish between Kurds domestically and abroad, the unfolding Kurdish challenge collapses the traditional demarcation of inside/outside for foreign policy formation with regard to Iran's peace and security. Iran now needs to explore solutions that simultaneously address issues related to Iranian Kurds as well as the Kurds in Iraq and the region. Tehran can have an alternative policy for Iraqi Kurdistan, which Turkey and Syria are lacking, and it can be fully implemented in case the Kurds manage to establish an independent state. Of the countries involved in this dispute, Iran has the strongest card to play on the Kurdistan issue, and that is the cultural proximity between the Kurds and the people of Iran.

Rouhani's Policy toward the Kurds

The arrival of Hassan Rouhani into presidency of Iran came at a critical time for the country with regard to domestic and regional stability. Rouhani was elected on a platform of internal and external change. He was inaugurated in August 2013 on the promise of addressing the country's economic crisis, easing social restrictions, freeing political prisoners, and remedying the diplomatic damage caused by the confrontational policies of the previous president. For Rouhani, it was clear that economic improvement could only happen if economic sanctions were eased or ended.³⁶ This reading of the close connection between domestic economic, social, and political improvement with

foreign policy is in accordance with the views of moderate foreign policy makers who support the idea of close contacts with regional powers but in a nonassertive form.³⁷ They subscribe to a more pragmatic approach, which is underscored by the search for rapprochement with the West and a gradual expansion of Iranian foreign policy in the region. Rouhani won support from Iran's youth, middle class, and ethnic minorities, and although he did not sketch out a specific program *vis-à-vis* ethnic minorities during his campaign, he established a special bureau in the office of the president responsible for matters that concern ethnic minorities soon after his appointment. This indicated his attention and willingness to address the question of ethnic equality as well as his desire to relegitimize (or desecuritize) ethnic issues.³⁸

Rouhani's approach to the Kurds in Iran and the region in the first two years of his term was characterized by ebb and flow. Rouhani's government appeared keen to bolster the economy in the Kurdish region of Iran, while he simultaneously embarked on negotiations with Iranian Kurdish opposition leaders based outside the country. In addition, Rouhani seems keen on increasing freedoms and minimizing political control. One Kurdish activist reported: "the level of repression under Rouhani is probably a quarter of what we faced in the previous years."³⁹ However, after two years, some Kurds were disappointed that Rouhani's government had failed to fulfill pre-election promises and to boost economic development in Iranian Kurdistan with infrastructure projects.⁴⁰ Disappointment among Iranian Kurds is also strengthened by the fact that Rouhani failed to appoint a Sunni Kurd as the governor of the region—another pre-election promise that was not delivered. The overall displeasure in Rouhani led the Secretary General of the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan Abdullah Mohtadi to state that "despite some initial optimism at his election as president, Hassan Rouhani has just proven to be a friendlier face of the same brutal regime."⁴¹ The lack of progress in Rouhani's policy toward Iranian Kurds is partly attributed to regime hardliners who highlight separatist threats in Iranian Kurdistan to justify the strong military presence. The conservatives are linked with the clergy and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), who held a large stake in the country's policy both internally and externally until Rouhani's election in 2014. The IRGC and its backers argue that an assertive Iranian policy based on political, economic, and cultural diplomacy is the best way to counter security threats in the region. The IRGC pushes for a tough security-led policy as a response to PJAK's warning to Rouhani in 2013; PJAK

threatened with creating a second Syria in case Iran would continue military operations against Kurdish forces in Iran.⁴²

ISIS's seizure of Mosul in June 2014 dramatically changed the security landscape of the region. The position of the region's Kurds has been strengthened immensely, especially after the success of containing the ISIS attack against the Kurdish town of Kobane near the Syrian–Turkish border. The victory obtained a symbolism of epic proportions, highlighting the elevated role of the Kurdish factor in the region. Rouhani's government has called for further strengthened ties with the Kurds in Iraq and Syria in light of the new security challenge called the Islamic State. To this end, Iran was the first country to provide weapons and ammunition to the KRG to enable the Kurdish *peshmerga* to fight and contain the advancements of ISIS.⁴³

Iran has been deeply troubled by the Syrian civil war and the power vacuum it has generated—a dimension that Akbarzadeh and Conduit discuss later in this volume. Rouhani currently seems to prefer this power vacuum to be filled by the Kurdish presence rather than the Islamic State. Although circles in Tehran may fear that if the upheavals reach Iran, the Kurds will seek to pioneer change, at the same time the belief that both the Kurds and Iran have a common enemy may foster stronger synergies. Tehran and Erbil brokered an agreement in April 2014 to construct twin oil and gas pipelines between the Kurdish region and Iran. This new level of energy cooperation is a sign that Iran is willing to foster further ties with the KRG, but the crucial question remains on how Iran will react to the enhanced claim for Kurdish independence in Iraq—a claim that gathers momentum although the KRG is treading very carefully on this matter.⁴⁴

The possibility of an independent Iraqi Kurdistan along with the fact that Turkey and the PKK are currently holding peace talks has forced Iran to consider its next moves *vis-à-vis* the Kurdish question. What is evident is that the policy of making a sharp distinction between Kurds internally and externally becomes more remote in the current security environment. It is clear that should Iran opt for closer links with the KRG, even in case of independence, it would also have to significantly revise its approach with regard to the Iranian Kurds. Tehran will have to conceive of the Kurds as a transnational issue that cannot be confined within or without Iran's international borders. To this end, Tehran might have to accept Kurdish independence in the same manner that it has come to accept Azerbaijan's independent existence.

Conclusion

The collapse of the boundaries between foreign and internal policy with regard to the Kurds poses a challenge inside and outside Iran's borders, and calls for a solution that will strengthen Rouhani's Iran. The logic of accommodation means stronger support, and possibly even independence for the KRG, to enable a firm buffer to withhold and fight ISIS. This may also require reconciliation with the Iranian Kurds, prompting an introspective take on the grand Islamic identity as an overarching bond of the communities in Iran. Given that the stated maximum aim of Iranian Kurds is autonomous rule, Iran could feasibly accommodate an independent KAR in Iraq without leaving itself open to domestic separatist claims from its own Kurds. However, for such a scenario to be realized, the situation on the ground must be seen not as a threat but as an opportunity for a strong citizenship test for Iran. Indeed, if Iran plays its cards right, it may end with great gains for the future of the Republic. This goes hand-in-hand with the logic of domestic inclusion and pragmatic foreign policy, a diptych of strategies that can create a zone of peace and stability in the troubled Middle East.

To this end, the employment of cultural diplomacy based on common ethnic origins instead of common religion is vital. This calls for a departure from the conventional wisdom of common Islamic religion, moving to a common ethnic origin that can underline shared cultures, myths, literature, and customs. This would be a viable starting point for redefining the *demos* within Iran, and create a close, friendly, and mutually beneficial relationship with the Kurds at large. However, mere reliance on ascriptive criteria is inadequate for the creation of an inclusive political identity that transcends the limitations of the nationalist project that was encapsulated in earlier versions of the nation-state and the Pahlavi Pan-Iranian movement.⁴⁵ Such a policy shift can be theoretically informed by a functionalist integration process, associated with political accommodation and peace-making rather than assimilation, imposition, and oppression.

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CHAPTER 7

Mesopotamian Nexus: Iran, Turkey, and the Kurds

William Gourlay

Introduction

This chapter examines the foreign policy options available to Iran under President Hassan Rouhani within the Mesopotamian neighborhood. It will focus particularly on Turkey, a fellow middle-power, non-Arab state in the Middle East, within the context of the shifting dynamics of Kurdish politics. Iran and Turkey may be seen as rivals in their immediate neighborhood.¹ They also assume very different poses in their relations with the West; Turkey is seen as a reliable ally of the West, while Iran is opposed to Western influence and involvement. Examining Iran's position relative to Turkey in the region through a purely realist prism would posit that the struggle for power is the fundamental political factor that determines the foreign policy of both countries. This would mean that direct clashes of interest and one-on-one power plays are the prime determinants of the Iran–Turkey relationship. The election of Hassan Rouhani to the presidency in 2013, however, raised the prospect of a more cooperative and collaborative Iranian foreign policy. Iran–Turkey relations, which had warmed in recent years, looked set to further improve under President Rouhani's purview.

This chapter, therefore, aims to examine Iran–Turkey relations from a broad perspective, without confining itself to the realm of direct state-to-state interactions. It will also take account of internal as well as wider regional dynamics and the extent to which they have an effect

on the formulation and execution of foreign policy for Iran. In this regard, Iran and Turkey grapple with a common internal political conundrum. Both are home to sizeable indigenous Kurdish minorities, a factor that plays out in their respective domestic political arenas as well as having considerable geopolitical implications for both countries. This situation is further complicated by the emergence of the semi-autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, which has created both challenges—and opportunities—for the Rouhani administration.

Such circumstances combine to create a textbook example of omnibalancing, a perspective that argues that beyond the dictates of classical “balance of power” theory, foreign policy formulation should take into consideration internal and external threats, accommodating the impacts of both, the importance of which may change over time.² Broadly speaking, the major threat to the Iranian regime has changed across decades. In the 1980s, the threat was external: Ba’athist Iraq. From the mid-1990s, the threat was internal, in the form of the reformist movement intent on political change. By the 2000s, an external threat had once again emerged in the form of a potential Western attack in response to the country’s nuclear program.

Taking account of pan-Kurdish solidarity that periodically straddles borders, the Kurds may simultaneously constitute an internal *and* an external political challenge for both Iran and Turkey. Iran, aiming to stem minority agitation within its own borders, has traditionally been wary of Kurdish attempts at autonomy, especially in Iraq. Turkey, for its part, has long attempted to suppress its restive Kurdish minority. Fears for its territorial integrity during a long-running war with the separatist-inclined Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) mean that traditionally Ankara has, similarly, looked unfavorably on Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq. However, as the specter of Kurdish separatism has subsided within Turkey, Ankara has developed extensive business relations with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) based in Erbil. Meanwhile, in recent years, Iran has fostered strong relations with the Shi’ite-led government in Baghdad. Broadly speaking, an axis of alliances has been forged: Tehran-Baghdad and Ankara-Erbil.

The advantages, or otherwise, of this dynamic were highlighted with the consolidation in 2014 of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS’s rapid advance and the ensuing retreat of Iraqi armed forces initially allowed the KRG to make territorial gains, thus raising

the prospect of Kurdish independence. This turn of events revealed the impotence of the Iraqi government in Baghdad and indeed the frailty of Iraq as a unified territory and sovereign state. The twin prospects of an independent Kurdistan and a dismembered Iraq created disquiet in Tehran and considerable challenges for Rouhani's foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif. Such a scenario would strengthen Turkey's hand in the neighborhood, through its close relations with Erbil. Meanwhile, Iran's position, facing the loss of the compliant Baghdad government, would be weakened, especially given the existence of ISIS as a malevolent presence on Iran's western border. In these circumstances, the imperatives of a foreign policy built upon "dialogue [and] constructive interaction," as trumpeted by Zarif, become more apparent.³ This chapter, then, will examine the nexus of Iranian–Turkish–Kurdish relations and the implications that these relationships have for Iran's foreign policy, recalibrated under President Rouhani.

Iran and Turkey: Rivalry and Contrasts

As middle-power, non-Arab states in the Middle East, Iran and Turkey have long been rivals. This dates back to the Safavid–Ottoman wars beginning in the sixteenth century. It was then that Iran assumed its Shi'ite identity in contradistinction to Ottoman Sunni identity. In the 1630s, the Ottomans retook Baghdad from the Safavids and the Treaty of Zuhab demarcated the border that still exists between Iran, Turkey, and Iraq.⁴ Safavid–Ottoman competition, however, was for power, influence, and territory, rather than doctrinal supremacy.

Sectarian differences are not a point of contention between Iran and Turkey today, because Iran and Turkey have operated entirely different political models since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. However, the two countries may each perceive the other as representing a source of internal threat, the Iranian regime wary of the secularist underpinning of Turkish politics, and Ankara wary of the model of political Islam that Iran upholds.⁵ It is clear that during this time, Turkey has been acutely alert to any political threats and economic opportunities that Iran may pose. Iran, however, has not been similarly attuned to hazards or opportunities that Turkey presents.⁶

Meanwhile, in pursuing separate political trajectories, Iran and Turkey have exchanged roles as the United States' most reliable ally (and political model) in the region; previously it was Pahlavi Iran, now it is Turkey. Iran's economic position has also shifted dramatically

relative to Turkey. Since 1979, Iran has been leapfrogged economically by Turkey: the Iranian economy was roughly twice the size of Turkey's at the time of the Islamic Revolution, where now it is roughly half the size.⁷ Tehran, no doubt, looks upon such a turn of events with concern, especially given the regional clout Turkey has acquired through such economic success.

Iran's foreign policy also stands in contrast to that of Turkey. Iran's involvement in its immediate neighborhood is a projection of power characterized as resistance to "imperialism" and conducted through political intervention, generally via proxies such as Hezbollah and support for Syria's Bashar al-Assad.⁸ Turkey has only recently re-engaged in the region pursuing a so-called no-problems-with-neighbors foreign policy after long remaining internally focused. Sometimes dubbed "neo-Ottomanism," this new Turkish approach saw a projection of soft power, including new visa regimes and trade agreements with Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and indeed Iran, as well as buddying up to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which raised some hackles in Tehran.⁹

Commonalities and Common Interests

Differing foreign policy perspectives aside, Iran and Turkey share certain affinities and interests. Some contend it was Turko-Persian cooperation that prevented the complete Arabization of the Middle East.¹⁰ President Khatami acknowledged historical affinities when he said to Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan in Tehran in 2004, "We are branches of the same tree."¹¹

Khatami met with Erdogan as part of a rekindling of Iran–Turkey relations that had been given impetus after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. It was a part of Turkey's broader "neo-Ottoman" overture. In fact, Ankara's warming of relations with Tehran was in contrast to the perceptions of other countries in the region toward Iran.¹² Turkish premier Erdogan articulated the innate logic of closer Iran–Turkey relations, remarking in Tehran, "We have all the ingredients, why can't we make *helva*? Apparently because there is no cook."¹³

The last decade has seen regular meetings and official delegations shuttling between Tehran and Ankara. Notable visits included Ahmadinejad's playing to the gallery in Istanbul in 2008, which prompted some observers to raise concerns that the West had lost Turkey.¹⁴ With a newly incumbent Iranian president in 2013, Iran–Turkey relations continue in an amicable vein. Within a year of coming

into office, President Rouhani had visited Ankara to cement relations, and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif had made several visits.

Earlier, relations between the Islamic Republic and Turkey's secularly inclined governments had remained cool, if polite. However, with the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP), themselves sometimes described as "mildly Islamist," in power, Iran and its political system is no longer perceived as a threat by Ankara. Further, Turkey's economic growth during this period has created demand for new export markets and for new sources of energy, both of which Iran has been able to provide. Iran quickly became Turkey's biggest regional trade partner. The value of Iran-Turkey trade in 2000 amounted to around US\$1 billion; it quadrupled by 2005; by 2008 it was worth \$10 billion and \$16 billion in 2011.¹⁵ Expanding trade with Turkey was also beneficial to Iran at this time as international pressure increased and sanctions over its nuclear program were imposed.

Indeed, Iran could count on Turkish support on certain geostrategic issues as well. Iranian-Turkish regional interests aligned after the beginning of the war in Iraq, something that grew increasingly valuable to Iran as increasingly strict sanctions were imposed from 2006. In Tehran, in October 2009, Erdogan expressed his dismay on Iran's *Press TV* at the West's "unfair" approach to Iran's nuclear program.¹⁶ The following year, Turkey, along with Brazil, worked to broker a nuclear fuel-swap deal that would resolve the ongoing dispute over Iran's nuclear program.¹⁷ Tolga Demiryol argues that, at face value, the strengthening of Iran-Turkey relations is a salutary example of the neoliberal schema, whereby increasing economic interdependence catalyzes political affinities.¹⁸ The cooks did get together and make geopolitical *helva*, it seems! Such was the convergence of Turkey's and Iran's economic and political interests as the Arab Spring unfurled, that some even speculated, as Arab states descended into turmoil, that the Middle East was destined for a Turko-Persian future.¹⁹

Iran's and Turkey's Kurdish Dilemma: Common Action or Conniving?

Another circumstance that Iran and Turkey share is that they are both home to sizeable Kurdish populations. The Kurds remain minor but persistent and important actors in the political arenas in Iran and Turkey. The separatist proclivities that arise periodically among Kurds

provide significant headaches for both Tehran and Ankara. It was on Iranian territory that the only ever Kurdish state was established, the short-lived Republic of Mahabad, while in Turkey the PKK's separatist campaign, a political aspiration now laid to rest, has been a 30-year challenge, the gravest that the Turkish Republic has faced. Thus, historically, it has been in both Iran's and Turkey's interests to keep Kurdish nationalism in check, a circumstance that would suggest that common action would be advisable or logical.

It would seem, however, that in the realm of geopolitics, for Iran, Turkey (and Iraq), the Kurds do not necessarily represent a problem shared (that might be, as the saying goes, a problem halved). Rather, the existence of a Kurdish minority across one's border has often presented an opportunity for policymakers to manipulate and massage events to the detriment of one's neighbors or to one's own political advantage.

In particular, Iran has a track record of using Kurdish nationalism to further its own foreign policy goals.²⁰ During the Iran–Iraq war of the 1980s, Iran supported the Iraqi Kurds as a fifth column against Saddam Hussein even as the Iranian Kurds, who had been enthusiastic supporters of protests against the shah prior to the success of the Islamic Revolution, sought amid the confusion of the war to seek their own political goals. Here was a manifest example of omnibalancing: Iran was prepared to incite the Iraqi Kurds despite the possibility of Iranian–Kurdish blowback, because Tehran calculated that the advantages of the Iraqi Kurds weakening the Ba'ath regime outweighed any potential tactical advances made by Kurds within Iran.²¹

Similarly, after the end of the Cold War, Iran saw Kurdish nationalism as a means to hobble Turkey as it sought to expand its reach and influence. Through the 1990s, Tehran turned a blind eye to PKK bases on Iranian soil in the knowledge that PKK agitation was a drag on Turkey's resources and diverted Ankara's attention from other strategic priorities.²² Iran's stance rankled Turkey's official circles. Aside from boosting trade, Turkish delegations to Iran in the last decade have focused on curtailing Tehran's support—or willful oversight—of PKK operatives based on Iranian soil.²³ Tehran became more amenable to Turkey's demands in this regard after the emergence of the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK), an Iranian offshoot of the PKK, which in turn was agitating within Iran.²⁴ Again, the Iranian position was an example of omnibalancing. When an external tactical advantage was available, Tehran willingly stoked the fires of the PKK, but once

it rebounded domestically, cooperating with Ankara proved to be the prudent course of action.

Where Iran's and Turkey's interests regarding the Kurds have long converged is in Iraq. Iran and Turkey have a common interest in seeing Iraq remain sovereign and intact. Ankara has long fretted at the impact that a free-standing Kurdish entity in northern Iraq might have on its own Kurdish population. Tehran, too, has been wary of such a prospect. While Iran has proven willing to cultivate the PKK, it has not recently been so forthcoming toward the Iraqi Kurds. Thus in examining Tehran's different stances toward Kurdish populations in Turkey and Iraq, we can deduce that Iranian policy view the usefulness of each Kurdish population in entirely different terms. Given Iran's strong links with Baghdad, Tehran is reluctant to back the Iraqi Kurds, whereas inciting the Turkish Kurds, via the PKK, is a means to hobble Turkey's strategic interests.

Competition in the Neighborhood

In 2009, Erdogan also spoke of the necessity of Iran and Turkey working together to ensure beneficial outcomes in Iraq (and Syria).²⁵ As noted, Iran's engagement in the Mesopotamian neighborhood may be viewed through a realist prism as a projection of hard power as circumstances allow, while Turkey focuses on soft-power projection through business and trade links. In the early stages of its "neo-Ottoman" outreach, Turkey developed closer ties with Assad's Syria, with it being suggested that this would further accelerate warming Iranian-Turkish relations.²⁶

With the advent of the Arab Spring, circumstances changed. Turkey's Erdogan came to adopt a strongly anti-Assad position, revealing starkly different positions between Iran and Turkey, although this does not appear to have unduly affected Iran-Turkey relations to date. Erdogan's outspokenness and his playing to the Arab street meant that in 2011 he, rather than Khamenei or any figure from Iran, came to be seen as a role model for the protesters in Tahrir Square and elsewhere. Turkey, not the Islamic Republic, provided the political model that protesters aspired to.²⁷ This was something of a come-uppance for Tehran which has, since the Islamic Revolution, maintained a much more steady focus on the region than Turkey. Here, too, Turkey's soft-power outreach proved much more salient than Iran's perceived hard-power approach, despite the extensive regional

networks of Iranian soft power *bonyads* that are discussed by Jenkins later in this volume.

Yet, while a stable and unified Iraq serves the interests of both Iran and Turkey, Iran has long worried that Turkey has designs on northern Iraq. In the 1920s, the Turkish nationalists, as they laid out a blueprint for their new republic, stipulated that Mosul was a Turkish possession.²⁸ Since the Gulf war of 1991, Iran has been concerned that should Iraq collapse, Turkey would claim Mosul. There is an ongoing conviction in Iran that Turkey is poised to take control, either directly or indirectly, of the oil fields of northern Iraq.²⁹ Here, it would be of benefit to President Rouhani's foreign ministry to understand that Turkey views northern Iraq primarily through the prism of Kurdish dynamics. That is, while Turkey was grappling with a separatist-inclined PKK, its concerns about northern Iraq were as to the intentions of the Iraqi Kurds—it feared that an Iraqi Kurdish state would further exacerbate its own Kurdish problem. Here, Turkey was also omnibalancing in that it was keeping tabs on an external issue (the status of northern Iraq) due to potential implications in the domestic realm, rather than necessarily seeking any geopolitical advantage. As such, the Iranian foreign ministry would do well to recognize that in northern Iraq, Turkey is merely interested in defending its own sovereignty and not specifically seeking any tactical advantage over Iran. To that end, Iranian and Turkish interests in northern Iraq are not necessarily at odds.

That said, the 2003 ouster of Saddam Hussein created something of a blank slate in Iraq, one on which Iran and Turkey could rekindle their dormant jockeying for influence in Mesopotamia. Iran quickly moved to capitalize on the ascendance of a Shi'ite-led government in Baghdad, leveraging its sectarian alignment and the fact that many prominent Iraqi Shi'ites were educated and groomed in Iran.³⁰ It stands to reason that Tehran, wary of the threat that Ba'athist Iraq previously posed, would prefer a weaker Iraqi entity, governed by sectarian-aligned government that would no longer loom as a rival or threat.³¹ After US military forces withdrew in 2011, Iran's already considerable influence and leverage further expanded in Iraq. In contrast, the Shi'ite ascendance in Baghdad placed Turkey at a disadvantage. Having none among the Iraqi groups to automatically ally with, Ankara was impelled to improvise to remain a relevant actor in Iraq and worked to establish trade and economic links with the KRG.³²

In fact, this served Kurdish interests as well. Iraqi Kurdish politician Jalal Talabani had earlier recognized that the Kurds needed alliances outside Iraq, and Turkey, as a pro-Western trade gateway to Europe, was a better option than Iran.³³ Here is another example of a neoliberal paradigm where while Turkish–KRG economic ties grew stronger, their political alliance strengthened accordingly. Meanwhile, Iran’s intrinsic compatibility with Shi’ite-led Baghdad created political affinities that served Tehran well from a realist perspective, enhancing Iran’s leverage and strategic position in Baghdad. Alternatively, one could argue that Iran has been caught flat-footed by Turkey’s proactive courting of the Kurdish regime and that it has set too much stock in its relationship with Shi’ite Iraq. Iran, after all, has a cultural affinity with the Kurds (who are a Persianate people) that it has not effectively exploited; thus, while it maintains influence and standing in the troubled Shi’ite-led south, it has largely missed out on enjoying the economic fruits of the dynamic Kurdish region.

It is worth highlighting that by the time Hassan Rouhani was inaugurated as president, Iran was increasing its support of the Assad regime in Syria, as noted in the chapter in this volume by Akbarzadeh and Conduit. Such a position put Tehran directly at odds with Ankara, which for some time had been pushing for the removal of Assad. President Rouhani, speaking in New York soon after his inauguration, remarked that his administration aimed to “focus on mutual confidence-building with our neighbors and other regional and international actors.”³⁴ Despite conflicting opinions with Turkey on Syria, Rouhani maintained an engaged and conciliatory tone on his first visit to Ankara in June 2014, stating, “Iran and Turkey are determined to increase their cooperation to establish stability in the region.”³⁵ Subsequently as events have unfurled, it has become clearer that Iran and Turkey have divergent visions for the region. This came to a head in the first half of 2015 with Turkey lending support to the Saudi-led campaign against the Houthis in Yemen and Erdogan accusing Iran of “trying to dominate the region.”³⁶

These dynamics do not mean that Iran and Turkey have been or need to be directly at loggerheads in Iraq, rather that they each pursued a distinct strategic trajectory, cultivating the Shi’ite-led government and the Kurdish regime, respectively, to achieve their own foreign policy ends. Neither Tehran nor Ankara desired their strategic partners in Iraq to be particularly strong. At the time that Rouhani assumed the presidency, as long as Iraq remained relatively stable, albeit

politically arthritic due to the disunity and ongoing jockeying among constituent populations, then Iranian and Turkish foreign ministries could maintain their current courses.

The Advance of ISIS

The *status quo* was shattered in June 2014, at the very time that President Rouhani was in Ankara, when ISIS took Mosul and put the Iraqi army to flight. Rouhani told an audience in Turkey, “The fight against violence, extremism, sectarian conflicts and terrorism is Iran’s major objective,”³⁷ but despite this and despite his stated intention to work more closely with Turkey, Tehran and Ankara have not engaged to address the threat of ISIS cooperatively. ISIS was an assertive player and militant group spouting an extremist ideology that had routed a US-trained military force. It was in control of swathes of territory, oil fields, and state-of-the-art military technology, and was poised to march on Baghdad. It also enjoyed a degree of support among some Sunnis in Iraq who had long chafed at the blatantly pro-Shi’ite position of the central government in Baghdad. The ease and speed with which ISIS advanced clearly demonstrated the impotence of the Iraqi government and the divisiveness of its rule.

Such was the severity of the threat that ISIS posed that pundits across the political spectrum raised the possibility of Iran co-operating with the United States to see off the threat.³⁸ For the Islamic Republic of Iran to cooperate with United States would seem an about face for the foreign ministry in Tehran, but it is not without precedent. In the early stages of the US-led “War on Terror,” when Mohammad Khatami was president and intent on rapprochement with the West, Tehran worked with Washington to help bring down the Taliban in Afghanistan. When Iran was shortly afterward dismissed as part of George Bush’s “Axis of Evil,” hardliners in Tehran were swift to denounce Khatami’s naiveté in attempting to engage with the West. This stalled, for the time being, any possibility of rapprochement. Here was Iran-specific omnibalancing: internal wrangling between hardliners and reformists influencing the direction of foreign policy (Bush’s recalcitrance notwithstanding).

The circumstances this time appear to be more conducive to Iran–US cooperation. President Rouhani, like Khatami before him, is working at re-engaging with the West, so common cause may be found. It is also hard to imagine President Obama dismissing any

Iranian support, should it be forthcoming, or lazily characterizing Iran as being on the “wrong side” in a broad geostrategic sense. Further, given the resources at its disposal (both military hardware and access to oil, which in turn generates revenue), ISIS apparently constitutes a greater threat to the region than the Taliban ever did, thus making the idea of cooperation more compelling.

The noises from Tehran as to the likelihood of joint Iranian–US action targeting ISIS are contradictory, however. Some officials have said that the crisis in Iraq affords an opportunity to further warm relations with Washington and to cooperate in order to stabilize Iraq and the region.³⁹ In a sign of a general mending of ties with the West, President Rouhani met with British Prime Minister David Cameron at the UN general assembly in September, discussing various matters, including ISIS.⁴⁰ In contrast, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei dismissed ISIS as a Western-backed “cast of morons and Saddam Hussein leftovers” and an attempt to incite war between Sunnis and Shi’ites.⁴¹ Referring to the then-ongoing nuclear talks, Khamenei told international diplomats that negotiations with the United States were “futile” and that Iran could cooperate with any country except “the Zionist regime and the US.”⁴²

The presence of ISIS, nonetheless, afforded Iran additional capital in its nuclear negotiations. The West sees ISIS as a more immediate threat to the region than it does Iran, thus it needs Iranian support, or at least acquiescence, if it is to take on ISIS. The West cannot afford to get Iran off side. Indeed, there is a feeling among Iranians, particularly in conservative circles, that the threat that ISIS represents works in some ways to the advantage of Iran, increasing its bargaining power on the world stage and highlighting its importance in the region.⁴³

Turkey, on the other hand, was slow to react to the emergence of ISIS. In fact, Ankara has been accused of complicity in its rise. From 2011, when its foreign policy outlook assumed a staunchly pro-Sunni hue and its antipathy toward Assad increased, Turkey allowed the free movement of Sunni militants across the Turkey–Syria border. Some of those militants were eventually absorbed into ISIS, yet Turkey continued for some time to turn a blind eye to its activities. Turkey appeared to have been stunned into inaction by the threat of ISIS, while also having had its hand restricted by the Turkish consular staff taken from Mosul and held hostage by ISIS until late September 2014.

The rise of ISIS presents an omnibalancing challenge to Iran (as it does to Turkey). ISIS is perhaps not a direct threat to Iran, as the

Kurdish region remains a hurdle that it must overcome to reach Iran, but ISIS is certainly an explicit threat to Iran's interests in Iraq and Syria. Publicly at least, Iran appears disinclined to work with the West to mitigate that threat, while Turkey, for its own reasons, remains reluctant to confront ISIS. However, the ISIS presence considerably alters dynamics for the Kurds in Iraq and Syria in ways that are likely to have long-term, flow-on effects for all regional players.

In particular, the ISIS siege of the Syrian–Kurdish enclave of Kobane became a watershed moment in the political development of the Kurds across the region, and indeed in the struggle against ISIS. Pan-Kurdish solidarity reached a crescendo when it appeared that Kobane might fall to ISIS and its inhabitants be put to the sword. The Turkish government's response, refusing to intervene or to even allow local Kurdish militias safe passage to relieve the city,⁴⁴ was received with bemusement internationally and provoked violent protests from Turkish Kurds. Iran, on the other hand, as reported on *Press TV*, stated its readiness to intervene on Kobane's behalf.⁴⁵

Significantly, however, the Kobane Kurds' daring struggle against ISIS militants received global media attention and, eventually, considerable military support from the United States and its allies. The West came to see the Kurds as reliable allies in the battle against ISIS, and a bulwark against religious extremism, a fact that should lend them significant political capital as regional crises reach their denouement and eventual resolution.

An Emboldened Kurdish Regional Government

Earlier, in the wake of the Iraqi army's retreat before ISIS militias, the Iraqi Kurdish *peshmerga* stepped in to take control of Kirkuk. Kirkuk had been a bone of contention between Iraq's Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen for some time. With the city—a putative Kurdish capital—in Kurdish hands, KRG President Barzani duly declared that Kurdish lawmakers should prepare for an independence referendum. Rouhani's foreign ministry immediately warned Erbil against taking this action.⁴⁶ Although Laoutides noted earlier in this volume that Iran was concerned about the implications that KRG independence might have on Iran's domestic Kurds, it is important to also note that Iran fears that an independent KRG could also embolden Turkey.

Iran has always maintained that it desires Iraq to remain intact. A fragmented Iraq and an independent Kurdistan present Iran with

several conundrums. First, the collapse of an ally, particularly one so subject to one's own influence, would be galling to see and would require recalibration of foreign policy on a significant scale and on multiple fronts. As long as Erbil remains part of a sovereign Iraq, Tehran, through its influence in Baghdad, has some leverage over the Iraqi Kurds. A free-standing Kurdistan would require Tehran to expend additional diplomatic capital in dealing with Erbil.

Second, if Kurdistan wins independence, it is likely to strengthen Turkey's hand in the region. As noted, the KRG enjoys close relations with Ankara. An independent Kurdish state is only going to become more dependent on Turkey for economic and strategic reasons. This would see the regional balance of power tip in Ankara's favor at the expense of Tehran.

Third, there is the possibility that a fledgling Kurdish state will have flow on effects in Iran's domestic sphere. Iran is a multiethnic society where little over 50 percent of the population is ethnically Persian. Tehran's policymakers would not see Iraq's Kurds peeling off to establish their own state as a healthy precedent. Iran, after all, has seen two breakaway ethnic republics in living memory, the Kurdish Mahabad Republic and the Iran–Azerbaijan People's Republic, while it also deals with a Baluchi insurgency on its southeastern border. As analysts have noted, Iran does not wish to see borders being drawn up according to the “grievances of minorities.”⁴⁷

An Independent Kurdistan: The View from Iran and Turkey

Ofra Bengio remarks that the success of the KRG in establishing itself as a democratic and well-governed autonomous entity is a source of pride for Kurds across the Middle East.⁴⁸ It is notable that when the KRG was recently threatened by further ISIS gains, Kurdish militias from Syria and Turkey crossed the border to defend KRG territory, an unprecedented collaboration between previously feuding factions. Events in Kobane also galvanized cross-border Kurdish solidarity.

While Kurdish populations in neighboring states look favorably on the KRG, those states themselves have in recent years taken a more accommodating position toward Kurdish autonomy. Baghdad has had to reconcile itself to an autonomous Kurdish political entity within its northern boundary. Turkey, with the separatist agenda of the PKK quelled and peace negotiations for a time looking promising, was much

less apprehensive and has in fact profited from its trade and economic activity with the Iraqi Kurds. Even the Kurdish takeover of Kirkuk did not meet criticism from Ankara. Syria, too, appears comfortable with some form of Kurdish autonomy, having ceded territory to the militia of the Kurdish Party of Democratic Unity (PYD). It is only Iran that remains intransigent in its Kurdish policy.⁴⁹

Iran's position is determined by its fear that an independent Kurdish state would incite among its own Kurdish population to mobilize and become an internal threat, a threat that may have a domino effect on other ethnic populations in Iran. Just what the mobilization of Iranian Kurds would amount to remains open to question, however. The Kurds have always played a central role in the political opposition in Iran and were enthusiastic supporters of Khatami and the Reformists of the mid-1990s.⁵⁰ Anecdotal evidence suggests Rouhani received significant support from Kurdish voters as well. Yet, the Kurdish struggle within Iran is generally positioned within the context of a broader struggle for political, economic, and social justice, undertaken within the existing political system, for all the people of Iran.⁵¹ Indeed, the Kurdistan Democracy Party of Iran (KDPI), the primary political organ of the Iranian Kurds, has never espoused a separatist cause, or a greater Kurdistan.⁵²

Iran's recalcitrance toward the Iraqi Kurds, and the prospect of a Kurdistan, appears, thus, to be premised on a negative reading of events. The assumption in Tehran is that greater degrees-of-freedom for the Iraqi Kurds would incite Iranian Kurds. This is the position that Turkey, aiming to keep a lid on the aspirations of its Kurdish population, also maintained for decades. But Robert Olson argues that Ankara eventually realized that the opposite may be possible, that, in particular, if the Erbil regime grew to be economically sound, it might actually become the locus for the development of other Kurdish-inhabited regions and in so doing assuage Kurdish grievances within Turkey.⁵³

Similarly, Henri Barkey noted that Turkey's establishing and maintaining cordial relations with the Kurdish regime in Erbil would have the effect of diffusing Kurdish tensions within Turkey.⁵⁴ To date, this is largely how things have panned out. Notwithstanding a great deal of hard work within Turkey to negotiate with the PKK, the pre-eminent Kurdish political group, Ankara's policy of engagement and fruitful trade with Erbil initially saw local Kurdish angst decline, while also allowing Turkey to capitalize on significant economic opportunities in

northern Iraq. Turkey's silence over the Kurdish takeover of Kirkuk reveals its more measured stance in the realm of Kurdish politics. Ankara has calmly accepted something that previously was considered anathema. It is reasonable to assume that Tehran taking a more conciliatory approach to Erbil would be perceived positively by Iranian Kurds, among whom the separatist impulse is not strong, in any case.

Shifting Dynamics and Opportunities for Rouhani

Barzani's talk of an independence referendum for the Iraqi Kurds may not be what it appears. While there is an undeniable groundswell of support among Iraqi Kurds for independence,⁵⁵ Barzani may well have been doing some omnibalancing of his own, playing to domestic audiences while also using the threat of departure as a bargaining chip in ongoing negotiations with Baghdad. In fact, Erbil understands that international support is essential to its existence,⁵⁶ so it will be wary of burning bridges by making rash decisions without consulting its international allies. Indeed, the KRG has taken a dose of realpolitik medicine, toning down its nationalist agenda and in fact increasing its cooperation with Baghdad since the ouster of Saddam. In so doing, it has strengthened its own position,⁵⁷ beyond which, it may be that with Kirkuk within its orbit, the KRG has one less argument with Baghdad and is thus less inclined to seek independence.

Further, as long as ISIS remains entrenched and intent on expansion in both Iraq and Syria, it would appear imprudent of the Iraqi Kurds to strike out alone. While having taken considerable steps toward establishing itself as an autonomous entity, the KRG has, in calling in outside support to see off the ISIS threat, revealed that its position is not as unassailable as previously thought. In fact, if ISIS is to remain a presence in the region, a robust and viable Kurdish entity— independent or otherwise—is in Iran's interest in that it will serve as a buffer zone between Iranian territory and ISIS.⁵⁸ Kurdish forces in both Syria and Iraq have generally held their own against ISIS, but the ISIS threat remains ever present. Given the extremist agenda of ISIS, the Iraqi Kurds cease to be the source of a potential internal threat to Iran and may become an ally, a bulwark against an external threat. In turn, the presence of ISIS can make the KRG more reliant on Iranian support, thus presenting opportunities for the Iranian foreign ministry to increase contacts and trade with Erbil. Notably, KRG

President Barzani remarked that Iran was the first country to respond to Kurdish requests for weapons in order to take the fight up to ISIS.⁵⁹ A senior KRG official further noted that when an ISIS offensive put Erbil in peril, Turkey, ostensibly an ally of the KRG, did not respond to requests for support.⁶⁰ It would appear, therefore, that there is an opportunity for Rouhani's foreign ministry to step up engagement and prove Iran, in implementing its new "cooperative" foreign policy, is a more reliable ally to the KRG.

In fact, the advance of ISIS has also had windfall benefits for Iran. With Iraq's borders with Turkey and Syria imperiled by the presence of ISIS, its eastern border with Iran becomes a more appealing conduit for trade. Thus, once ISIS took control of Mosul, Iran's exports to Iraq began increasing significantly.⁶¹ Meanwhile, the KRG has courted Iran in the hope of signing energy trade agreements.⁶² By the same token, direct Iran-KRG trade, which had rapidly grown in recent years, increasing to \$3 billion by 2011,⁶³ dropped precipitously in the immediate wake of ISIS's territorial gains.⁶⁴

Turkey eventually moved to stem the flow of fighters into Syria and declared that it would join the international coalition against ISIS.⁶⁵ However, from an omnibalancing perspective, Ankara was preoccupied with its domestic political arena for much of 2014 and 2015, presidential elections, transitions of power within the ruling AKP, and general elections obscuring external political dynamics. Cooperation with Iran to present a united military front against ISIS therefore appears unlikely due to heightened tensions between Tehran and Ankara, given the circumstances in Syria and Yemen. Iranian–Turkish business relations continue to strengthen, however, with President Rouhani signing trade agreements in Ankara in 2014 amid expectations that the volume of trade would rise to US\$35 billion by 2015,⁶⁶ and Erdogan talking up further opportunities for economic cooperation on a visit to Tehran in April 2015.⁶⁷

Conclusion

As President Rouhani surveys the Mesopotamian neighborhood, then, he may be confident that relations with Turkey will remain strong. With Erdogan now installed as president and the architect of the no-problems-with-neighbors foreign policy appointed as prime minister, Turkey is unlikely to neglect its major neighbor to the east. In fact, Tehran's hand is now strengthened as regards Ankara. Turkey has lost friends in the region (Syria and Egypt most prominently), and any kudos from the early days of the Arab Spring has rapidly

dissipated, thus Ankara will be keen to maintain cordial relations with Iran, particularly given the export markets and natural resources it affords. Further, Turkey's ambivalent response to the Kobane crisis and the ISIS threat more broadly has many Western pundits questioning Ankara's reliability as an ally. This may create an opportunity for President Rouhani to seek further rapprochement and push Iran's credentials as a partner in the region.

Iran, in turn, sees ISIS as threatening its interests in the region, most obviously governments in Baghdad and Damascus, but not as a direct threat. In some regards, the presence of ISIS affords Iran more geopolitical capital. While direct Iranian–US cooperation is unlikely against ISIS,⁶⁸ the West will now look upon Iran more favorably as it aims to contain or defeat ISIS. This gave Tehran more bargaining power in the nuclear negotiations concluded in 2015 and provides opportunities, should they be wanted, to further warm relations with the United States and others. Just what shape US–Iranian relations may assume will be determined by internal factors within Iran. If Rouhani is able to maintain a robust premiership, he will continue his conciliatory approach to the West; if hard-line voices are ascendant, a warming of relations is not on the cards.

To return to an omnibalancing perspective, it is apparent that both internal and external threats to Iran are manageable at present. On the external front, Western pressure on Iran, due to a preoccupation with ISIS and the signing of the nuclear deal, is decreasing, while Turkey, preoccupied for different reasons, is in no position to challenge Iran in the Mesopotamian neighborhood. Internally, there are few threats to the Iranian regime; the reform movement is effectively neutered, and if Tehran plays its cards right, improving relations and trade links with Erbil offer a way to smooth ruffled feathers among Iran's Kurds. All of this means that Tehran is well placed to extend its influence, expand trade links, and heighten its standing in the Mesopotamian neighborhood.

In conclusion, one of the hallmarks of Iran's foreign policy is that it has long seen itself as standing alone in the international arena.⁶⁹ President Rouhani, however, would do well to realize that Iran is not alone in seeing itself as alone. The Kurds and Turkey similarly see themselves as being isolated and marginalized.⁷⁰ But therein lies a great opportunity for Iran to assertively pursue the "collaborative" foreign policy that it now espouses and in so doing forge strong and enduring links with its Mesopotamian neighbors, links that will bring benefits to all parties involved.

Notes

1. And beyond: since the end of the Cold War, Iran and Turkey have been competitors for influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus.
2. On omnibalancing see Stephen David, *Choosing Sides: Alignment and Realignment in the Third World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).
3. Mohammad Javad Zarif, "What Iran Really wants: Iranian Foreign Policy in the Rouhani Era," *Foreign Affairs*, 93, 3 (2014).
4. The treaty of Zuhab also meant the retreat of Iran from Mesopotamia, a region that had been within its sphere of interest since the Achaemenid period (circa 500BC).
5. See Suleyman Elik, *Iran-Turkey Relations, 1979–2011: Conceptualising the Dynamics of Politics, Religion, and Security in Middle-Power States* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 65.
6. Elliot Hentov, *Asymmetry of Interest: Turkish-Iranian Relations Since 1979* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012).
7. Hentov, *ibid*, cited in Roland Elliott Brown, "Siamese Rivals: Iran and Turkey," *Iran Wire*, June 2014.
8. Sean Kane, "The Coming Turkish-Iranian Competition in Iraq," in *United States Institute of Peace Special Report* (Washington: Institute of Peace, 2011).
9. Elik, *Iran-Turkey Relations*: 66.
10. Elik, *Iran-Turkey Relations*: 2.
11. See Robert Olson, *The Goat and the Butcher: Nationalism and State Formation in Kurdistan-Iraq since the Iraqi War* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2005), 93.
12. Tolga Demiryol, "The Limits to Cooperation between Rivals: Turkish-Iranian Relations since 2002," *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, 4, 2 (2013).
13. See Olson, *The Goat and the Butcher*: 92–3.
14. For related discussion see Soner Çagaptay, "Turkey Bows to the Dark Side," *Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 2008.; Nick Danforth, "How the West Lost Turkey," *Foreign Policy*, November 25, 2009.
15. Demiryol, "Limits to Cooperation."
16. Shireen Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 167.
17. See Elik, *Iran-Turkey Relations*: 4.
18. Demiryol, "Limits to Cooperation."
19. Mohammed Ayoob, "Beyond the Democratic Wave: A Turko-Persian Future," *Middle East Policy*, 18, 2 (2011).
20. Kerim Yıldız, *The Kurds in Iran: The Past, Present and Future* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 69–70.
21. This also demonstrates how Iranian policymakers simultaneously view Kurdish issues through the prisms of both local and international affairs.
22. Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy*: 161.

23. Yıldız, *Kurds in Iran*: 67.
24. Elik, *Iran-Turkey Relations*: 33.
25. See Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy*: 166–67. This was prior to current imbroglios in both countries.
26. Ayoob, “Beyond the Democratic Wave.”
27. Henri J. Barkey, “Turkish-Iranian Competition after the Arab Spring,” *Survival*, 54, 6 (2012): As the initial euphoria of the Arab Spring has diminished and after the political unrest in Turkey in summer of 2013, Erdoğan’s stocks have since fallen considerably on the Arab street.
28. For more on this era see David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3 ed. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 370.
29. Robert Olson, *Turkey-Iran Relations, 1979–2004: Revolution, Ideology, war, Coups and Geopolitics* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2004), 4–5.
30. S. Güliden Ayman, “Turkey and Iran: Between Friendly Competition and Fierce Rivalry,” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 36, 1 (2014).
31. Kane, “Coming Turkish-Iranian Competition.”
32. Olson, *The Goat and the Butcher*: 12–13.
33. McDowall, *Modern History*: 383–84.
34. Council on Foreign Relations, “Hassan Rouhani,” September 26, 2013, <http://www.cfr.org/iran/hassan-rouhani/p35522>
35. *Reuters*, June 9, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/06/09/us-iran-turkey-rouhani-idUSKBN0EK14720140609>
36. *Reuters*, March 27, 2015, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2015/03/26/yemen-security-turkey-idINKBN0MM2NW20150326>
37. *Reuters*, June 9, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/06/09/us-iran-turkey-rouhani-idUSKBN0EK14720140609>
38. See for instance Ryan Crocker, “Our Common Cause with Iran,” *The Washington Post*, July 13, 2014.
39. *Reuters*, June 30, 2014; <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/06/30/us-iraq-crisis-iran-dilemmas-idUSKBN0F51SP20140630>
40. *BBC News*, September 24, 2014, “David Cameron Holds Talks with Iran’s Hassan Rouhani”; <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-29345404>
41. *INCA News*, June 29, 2014; <http://www.incanews.com/en/file/541/khamenei-iraq-a-showdown-between-humanity-barbarity>
42. Reza Haghighat Nejad, “Ayatollah Khamenei: ‘Negotiations with the U.S. Are Futile,’” *Iran Wire*, August 13, 2014. <http://en.iranwire.com/features/5947/>
43. Payam Mohseni, “The Iranian Elite and the Nuclear Negotiations: My Reflections from Iran,” *Iran Matters* (2014). <http://iranmatters.belfercenter.org/blog/iranian-elite-and-nuclear-negotiations-my-reflections-iran>
44. Turkey eventually did allow a number of *peshmerga* from northern Iraq to cross the border into Kobane, but maintained its refusal to allow Syria- or Turkey-based Kurdish fighters access.
45. In the event, Iran did not send assistance, but its offer, no doubt, was noted by Kurdish observers. PressTV, October 8, 2014, “Iran will take action on

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CHAPTER 8

Charting a New Course? Testing Rouhani's Foreign Policy Agency in the Iran–Syria Relationship

Shahram Akbarzadeh & Dara Conduit

Iran and Syria have enjoyed one of the most enduring alliances in the Middle East, with the relationship surviving the Iran–Iraq war, decades of international sanctions, and the Iranian nuclear dispute. The alliance took on new significance after the outbreak of war in Syria in 2011 when Iran, led by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, provided decisive diplomatic and materiel support for the Syrian regime. The largesse of this support suggested that for many in Tehran, the Iran–Syria alliance remained as important in 2011 as it was when it was established in 1979. The election of the reformist President Hassan Rouhani in 2013 appeared to complicate this calculus, with speculation emerging that he would temper Iran's support for Syria. In practice, however, Rouhani's response to Syria has been muted, reflecting an attempt to placate the international community while simultaneously preserving Iran's most reliable regional alliance. In doing this, Rouhani has also inadvertently revealed the deeply polarizing impact that the Syrian crisis has had on the Iranian political elite, as well as the limits of presidential power in Iran.

This chapter looks at the building blocks of Iran's foreign policy toward Syria and reflects on the changes that have taken place since President Rouhani came to power. Initially providing a brief history of the relationship and reviewing Iran's approach to Syria under President Ahmadinejad, this chapter will then turn to Rouhani's first two years in office to ask how Rouhani conceives Iran's relationship with Syria.

It argues that although Rouhani has attempted to lead policy change toward Syria, his domestic rivals have curtailed his success. By 2015, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) had almost totally sidelined his foreign policy agency in relation to Syria.

Background

The Iran–Syria alliance was established soon after the Iranian revolution in 1979 and has evolved and been tested in the context of the difficult Middle Eastern political landscape. Syria became a firm ally of Iran in the Islamic Republic's early days, siding with Iran in its eight-year war with Iraq (1980–1988). It is difficult to overstate the significance of this decision considering that the rest of the Arab world had rallied behind Iraq. At times, Syria's support for Iran was instrumental, particularly when it blocked the trans-Syrian oil pipeline that was a major artery for Iraq's oil exports. This dealt Iraq a devastating economic blow of a reported US\$17 million per day.¹ In return, Syria received subsidized oil from Iran, an arrangement that continues today.²

Although at face value, Syria's support for Iran over Iraq might seem like an unusual move for an Arab state that prided itself on pan-Arab solidarity, the Iran–Syria alliance was founded on a solid geopolitical foundation. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, both Iran and Syria were isolated internationally. Iran had proclaimed a commitment to “Neither East nor West” and was left with very few friends, while Syria faced a Sunni Islamist insurgency that was backed by neighboring Arab governments, including Iraq. Iran and Syria also share a number of strategic interests. Both countries are ardent opponents of Israel and the United States, and have given significant support to Palestinian groups, as well as Hezbollah. According to one commentator, “if Iran is Hizballah's oxygen tank, Syria would be the air hose.”³ From the outset, therefore, Tehran and Damascus formed a pragmatic political and military alliance that was proudly celebrated as the “Axis of Resistance.”

Observers are often quick to point to religious commonality between Iran and the Syrian government to explain the closeness of the relationship, although the explanatory power of such justifications is fairly limited. The state religion in Iran is Twelver Shi'a Islam, which believes in the succession of Ali ibn Talib, Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, as the legitimate heir to the Prophet to lead the Muslim community. Ali is considered to be the first infallible Imam deserving

of Muslim allegiance, a quality that was passed down his blood line until the occultation of Mohammad al-Mahdi, the 12th Imam, in 941AD. In contrast, the ruling Assad regime in Syria is often viewed as a mouthpiece for the Alawite sect, whose traditions are secretive and revere Ali. The Alawite sect was only formally recognized as part of the Shi'a community in 1973.⁴ Claims of religious commonality are further constrained by the reality that the Syrian regime has been deliberately secular. Given the small size of the Alawite community in Syria, which is estimated to be approximately 12 percent of the total population, secularism has been an essential pillar in the legitimacy of the Assad regime. Nonetheless, the religious difference between Iran and Syria is generally ignored by public commentators in the largely Sunni Arab world and western media, who assume that the shared belief in Ali is the main driver of the Iran–Syria alliance.

The Iran–Syrian Alliance Under President Ahmadinejad

The Iran–Syria relationship remained important during the Ahmadinejad Presidency (2005–2013), with the countries signing a formal defense pact in 2006.⁵ This went hand in hand with a significant increase in trade and cultural ties.⁶ Ahmadinejad said in July 2007 that the countries are “two united brothers who will remain united.”⁷ Ahmadinejad repeatedly framed Syria and Iran as key partners in the support of the (Sunni) Palestinian cause. In the years following the 2006 Lebanon War, billboards depicting Ahmadinejad, Assad and the Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, decorated the streets of Damascus. In 2010, Ahmadinejad, Nasrallah, and Assad visited the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus together. Ahmadinejad and Assad later released a statement emphasizing the countries’ “deep and brotherly ties.”⁸

Tehran was caught off-guard by the spread of the Arab Spring to Syria in March 2011. Iran's leaders had loudly supported the uprisings in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, not expecting the protests to spread to Syria. The emergence of protests in Syria created a dilemma for Iran, as the popular anti-regime revolt did not fit Iran's preferred cliché of an Arab revolt against Western-backed regimes. Had Tehran accepted that events in Syria had similar foundations to those in North Africa, it would have compromised its crucial Middle Eastern alliance. Iran's instinctive response was therefore to deny the legitimacy of the popular uprising and dismiss the Syrian opposition as thugs and mercenaries in the pay of external powers.⁹

Ahmadinejad provided decisive support for Assad from the beginning of the Syrian uprising, recognizing Syria's importance as Iran's line of defense in the Levant, and understanding that the viability of Hezbollah was on the line. Ahmadinejad proclaimed that,

The people and government of Syria are Muslims and Islamic countries should enter the issues of this country through an overall consensus and help to the settlement of the differences and carrying out of reforms.¹⁰

He also suggested that Western intervention in Syria would “rescue the Zionists and suppress the Palestinians and other Islamic countries, harshly.”¹¹ These sentiments were echoed by the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, who proclaimed in 2012 that, “Iran supports the Syrian regime because Syria is a crucial component of the ‘axis of resistance’ against Israel. Iran is against any kind of interference in Syria by western forces.”¹²

Iran provided significant financial and military support for Assad. This included extending a US\$3.6 billion line of credit to Syria in July 2013 on the eve of President Rouhani's inauguration. Indeed, a Syrian trade official told *Reuters* in 2014 that, “if it had not been for Iranian support we could not have survived the crisis.”¹³ Iran also sent trainers and advisers from the IRGC's elite Quds Force, high-tech weapons and equipment, and the technology to enhance Assad's monitoring of Syrian citizens online.¹⁴ Although Iran claimed to have no troops on the ground, in July 2012, Syrian rebels captured 48 Iranian nationals that the Free Syrian Army claimed were IRGC cadres “on a reconnaissance mission in Damascus.”¹⁵ Iran denied the accusation, claiming that the nationals were pilgrims. They were later released as part of a prisoner swap.¹⁶ However, Iran's denial of involvement in the theater became less plausible after it approved the entrance of between 5,000 and 7,000 Lebanese Hezbollah troops into Syria in early 2013.¹⁷ Hezbollah could not have entered Syria without the consent of Iran's Supreme Leader, implying that Iran's audacious Syria policy was sanctioned at the highest level. Hezbollah's involvement in Syria indicated that Tehran perceived the Syrian war a serious threat, as they risked Hezbollah's prized domestic reputation in Lebanon. This was a significant sacrifice, deemed worthwhile in the risk assessment undertaken by Iran's political elite.

The scale of Iranian-Syrian military cooperation in this period prompted the defected Syrian General and former-member of the

Syrian President's inner circle, Munaf Tlass, to accuse Assad of having "sold Syria to the Iranians."¹⁸ Tlass's father, Mustafa Tlass, had been a trusted advisor to President Assad's late-father, President Hafez al-Assad. The defected former-Syrian Prime Minister, Riyad Hijab, echoed Tlass' criticism in even stronger terms, claiming that, "Syria is occupied by the Iranian regime. The person who runs the country is not Bashar al-Assad, but Qassem Soleimani, the head of the Iranian regime's Quds force."¹⁹

The IRGC's Stake in the Conflict Under Ahmadinejad

The corollary of Iran's decision to provide significant military support to Syria was that the IRGC strengthened its stake in the decision-making and implementation process, which would later prove difficult to reverse. The IRGC has a significant interest in preserving Bashar al-Assad's reign; the Assad regime has been a crucial sponsor of Hezbollah, which initially emerged with IRGC assistance in the early 1980s. The IRGC has historically wielded significant power—if not total control—over Iran's Syria policy. In fact, in 2008, the IRGC chief Qassem Soleimani sent a message to the former-CIA Director General David Petraeus that stated:

General Petraeus, you should be aware that I, Qassem Soleimani, control Iran's policy for Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and Afghanistan.²⁰

It was therefore inevitable that the IRGC would continue to support Assad in the Syrian war. The IRGC made its position on the war clear from the outset—in December 2011, a former-Commander, Mohsen Rezaee, announced that, "Syria is Iran's red line. We will not remain silent toward what others are planning against Syria and the axis of resistance."²¹ This became a recurring message.

The IRGC had already enjoyed unprecedented power under Ahmadinejad before the outbreak of war in Syria. Although it is an extra-political organization charged with protecting the revolution, it wields significant economic and political power because of the role it played in the Iran–Iraq war.²² The IRGC took on a more proactive political role under Ahmadinejad, for the first time articulating its own foreign policy goals. The IRGC also increased its stake in the Iranian economy, receiving multi-billion dollar government energy and construction contracts.²³ Most of President Ahmadinejad's cabinet

(including Ahmadinejad himself) were former-IRGC cadres, or had close links to the institution.²⁴

However, the Syrian conflict enhanced the IRGC's reach further, giving the Guards a specific mandate to carry out some foreign policy functions. This saw the IRGC extend its influence beyond formal channels in the Syrian conflict by using Shi'a militias as well as Hezbollah. Iran facilitated the entry of Shi'a foreign fighters from Iraq and even Afghanistan into the Syrian theater.²⁵ These groups, which include Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, Kataib Hezbollah, and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, receive close instruction and financial support from the IRGC.²⁶ The groups purport to be defending the Sayyidah Zainab Shrine, which is a Shi'a pilgrimage site in the southern suburbs of Damascus, although in practice, they have played a key role fighting alongside regime forces in the Damascus countryside.²⁷ Reports also emerged in 2012 that Iran had formed an indigenous Syrian militia made up of fighters from the country's Shi'a and Alawite sects, under the name of Jaysh al-Sha'bi.²⁸

Although it is unlikely that the IRGC could have undertaken much of this activity without Khamenei's approval, there was indication of an emerging rift between the IRGC and Iran's political hardliners during Ahmadinejad's presidency. This was surprising given that both Khamenei and Ahmadinejad had provided unequivocal support for the Assad regime. Yet provocative comments by IRGC Commanders on Syria were repeatedly removed from websites during this period, implying that the IRGC wanted to escalate Iran's support for Syria beyond what the country's political leaders would tolerate. Indeed it appeared that for some members of the IRGC, the collapse of the Assad regime was to be prevented at any cost. This was seen in 2012 when the deputy chief of the Quds Force, Ismail Ghaani, proclaimed that, "before our presence in Syria, too many people were killed by the opposition but with the physical and non-physical presence of the Islamic republic, big massacres in Syria were prevented."²⁹ The comments were promptly deleted from the Iranian Students News Agency website. Likewise, Colonel Mohammad Ali Assoudi, the IRGC Deputy for Culture and Propaganda, caused controversy when he stated that:

If America were to attack Syria, Iran along with Syria's allies [i.e. Hezbollah] will take action, which would amount to a fiasco for America . . . In the case of American stupidity and a military attack by this country on Syria, the joint military pact of Syria's allies would be implemented.³⁰

The comment was also removed from the internet. This pattern of the publication of bellicose statements followed the removal of webpages prompted speculation that the IRGC's approach to Syria may have fallen out of favor with Khamenei, who was apparently frustrated that the IRGC's bold approach in Syria had failed to end the conflict or secure Assad.³¹ This does not, however, appear to have deterred the IRGC, which was buoyed by both its role in Syria and the extensive resources and power it amassed during Ahmadinejad's two presidential terms.

The Rouhani Presidency

By the time President Rouhani took office in August 2013, the Syrian conflict had been underway for more than two years. Speculation quickly emerged that Rouhani would pursue a different approach in Syria, favoring a diplomatic solution based on an Iran–Syria relationship beyond President Assad. Although Rouhani had not formally stated a position on Syria, regional media outlets published a steady stream of off-the-record comments from sources purportedly close to the new president. This was seen in July 2013 when an anonymous Rouhani adviser told *Al-Monitor* that Rouhani was working on a plan to convince Assad and the opposition to begin negotiations.³² Another unnamed former-Rouhani aide suggested that Rouhani wanted to find a “Syrian Karzai,” in the form of a Syrian Sunni Arab that could bridge the divide between Iran, the United States, and the Syrian people.³³ Such speculation created a groundswell of expectation that Rouhani would reconfigure Iran's relationship with Syria, but in practice little changed.

Rouhani's approach to Syria was formed in the context of crippling sanctions, international isolation, and the stalling Iranian economy. These considerations were fundamental to the way the new government in Tehran viewed the Syria crisis. Rouhani needed to reintegrate Iran into the international community, relieve the pressure of international sanctions, and resolve the nuclear issue. That was a top priority. In this context, Iran began to soften its position on Syria in order to advance its bargaining power in the nuclear talks. At the same time however, Syria remained an important geostrategic ally for Iran. President Rouhani is only too aware of the peril of losing Iran's most durable regional ally. This thinking was evident in the observations of one Iranian official, who noted that “Hezbollah today is the crown jewel of the resistance bloc; presidential moderation doesn't mean giving up

the nation's strengths."³⁴ With this in mind, Syria will remain a crucial part of Iran's strategic doctrine under any Iranian administration.

Reconciling the International with the Regional: Rouhani's Approach to Syria

Rouhani's attempts at reconciling Iran's international ambitions with its regional geostrategic interests were evident from the moment of his inauguration. Rouhani's comments on the Syrian opposition signaled a shift in the Iranian political discourse, which quickly came into line with the international view on Syria. This was first seen in a press conference in August 2013, when Rouhani highlighted the importance of reaching a political solution for Syria:

The solution in Syria is a political solution, with the presence of all Syrian groups, including government officials and opponents. Of course, the small terrorist groups that organize in foreign countries . . . must be evicted from Syria in any case.³⁵

It is difficult to overstate the significance of this rhetorical change on the Syrian opposition. For the first time, an Iranian president implied that some Syrian opposition groups held legitimate grievances. Likewise, he acknowledged that the "terrorists" fighting in Syria were not a significant part of the opposition equation. This marked a major shift from the IRGC/Ahmadinejad administration's position, which had blamed the crisis in Syria on foreign powers and dubbed all members of the opposition as "terrorists." The adjustment in language appeared to also be a nod to the international community. Rouhani reiterated this perspective in August 2013, when he said:

The Syrian people should make a decision about the Syrian issue—whether they are from among the supporters of the government or the rebels. First, the others [other states, UK, USA] should pave the way [for a solution]. Second, they should not interfere. Third, they should stop sending weapons and encouraging terrorists.³⁶

This time, Rouhani again acknowledged that the "rebels" needed to be part of discussions on Syria's future, and distinguished them from "terrorists." This was also important as it recognized that the international community had a role to play in resolving the conflict. It is worth noting however that such a policy would represent a major threat to

the IRGC's interests in Syria. Any Syrian peace deal that incorporates the opposition and makes way for Assad's resignation would fatally compromise the IRGC's influence in Syria and Lebanon.

However, for all of Rouhani's verbal moderation, Iran's new president still demonstrated awareness of the importance of Syria and Hezbollah. Rouhani's choice of Defense Minister spoke volumes about the new administration's priorities. Defense Minister Brigadier General Hossein Dehghan was a Senior IRGC commander who led the IRGC's Lebanon and Syria activity between 1982 and 1984, at the time of Hezbollah's establishment.³⁷ Dehghan has been dubbed "one of the founding fathers" of Hezbollah, and purportedly has a close relationship with the group's leader, Hassan Nasrallah.³⁸ Given Dehghan's intimate ties to Hezbollah, his appointment can be interpreted as a sign that Rouhani did not intend to significantly recalibrate the Iran–Hezbollah relationship, and by extension, the Iran–Syria alliance. His strong stance on the legitimacy of the opposition, however, implied that Rouhani might have been willing to accept a future Syrian government without Assad at the helm, as long as Hezbollah remained viable.

Rouhani's lukewarm approach to Assad himself emerged just three weeks after his inauguration, after Syrian government forces used chemical weapons on Ghouta near Damascus, killing nearly 1500 people.³⁹ Rouhani responded to the news in a manner unprecedented amongst the Iranian leadership, Tweeting:

Iran gives notice to international community to use all its might to prevent use of chemical weapons anywhere in the world, esp. in #Syria⁴⁰

This tweet was significant because Rouhani did not blame the Syrian opposition, and also left open the possibility that the Syrian government might be responsible. Rouhani's comments stood in stark contrast to Moscow's response, which laid responsibility squarely at the feet of the Syrian rebels.⁴¹ Rouhani told IRGC commanders a few weeks later that chemical weapons are not legitimate: "we oppose chemical weapons. Whatever group or individual in whatever place uses these weapons, we will condemn it, and it is unacceptable for us."⁴² Rouhani repeatedly referred to Iran's own experience of suffering chemical attack during the Iran–Iraq war to galvanize his position.⁴³

Rouhani's comments during this period were significant because although they did not overtly criticize Assad, they implied that Iran

would not oppose Assad being held to account. This gave further momentum to the rumors that Rouhani supported the resignation of President Assad. The shift appears to have been informed by Rouhani's international interests, as Foreign Minister Javad Zarif had hosted the UN Undersecretary, Jeffrey Feltman, in Iran days earlier.⁴⁴ After the meeting, President Rouhani tweeted the statement above, and Zarif told reporters that Iran had recommended to Syria that it allow UN weapons inspectors onto the ground. This demonstrated a concrete outcome of Iran's attempts to reintegrate into the international community. In this context, Maloney observed that Rouhani's comments were not "terribly subtle."⁴⁵ Syria's decision to give up its long-held and substantial chemical weapons cache can be seen as a major victory for Rouhani.

Rouhani also took a bold approach to the failed January 2014 Geneva II peace talks, which he publically endorsed as an opportunity to resolve the Syrian conflict. He surprised observers by pointing out that if Iran attended the "international forum, naturally Iran will hold talks with others (states) about this issue," which marked a major development as Rouhani demonstrated his willingness to negotiate with the international community on Syria.⁴⁶

The first six months of Rouhani's Presidency were defined by these appeals for dialogue in Syria. Rouhani was attempting to bring Iran's approach to Syria closer to the western perspective. While this did not lead to the complete rethink of the relationship as some of his supporters had hoped, Rouhani gave the impression that Iran might support a post-Assad Syrian government. But ultimately, Rouhani's influence on Iran's Syria policy was short-lived.

Limits on Presidential Power: President Rouhani's IRGC Challenge

The Syrian crisis has served as a test case of the power balance in the Iranian political system and the authority of the president.⁴⁷ The Iranian constitution splits political power between various bodies, but enshrines the Supreme Leader with decisive authority. The President, who is directly elected by the population, is theoretically the second most powerful person in the country, although the Supreme Leader has historically curtailed this role, particularly on matters of foreign policy. The question therefore remains whether Rouhani technically has the power to change Iran's foreign policy on Syria. The general consensus

among observers is that he does not. According to an Iranian official quoted in *Al-Monitor*, anyone who suggests that Iran's policy toward Hezbollah would change merely because the presidency changed is either naive or daydreaming.⁴⁸

Given the IRGC's unprecedented role during the Ahmadinejad era, it was clear that the Guards would become a major thorn in the new president's side on the issue of Syria. In July 2013—a month before Rouhani's inauguration—an article published on an ultra-conservative website linked to the IRGC proclaimed that “Hassan Rouhani cannot [promote a ceasefire in Syria], nor it is within his jurisdiction to do so.”⁴⁹ Other media outlets affiliated with the IRGC also vocally pushed an uncompromising line on Syria. For example, *Javan* reported the death of three IRGC commandos near the Sayiddah Zainab shrine in August 2013. This was old news: the deaths had occurred two months earlier in June in a rocket attack, but *Javan* only reported it as Rouhani was taking office.⁵⁰ The message was clear: Rouhani should not betray a policy for which blood has been spilt. A senior Iraqi Shi'a figure from the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq prompted speculation of further tension between the IRGC and Rouhani, after reporting that Rouhani wanted President Assad to resign.⁵¹

President Rouhani was mindful of the IRGC challenge from the outset. In September 2013 in a speech at the annual meeting of IRGC commanders, Rouhani told the Guards to stay out of politics, warning that “the Corps should supplement political currents but should not accompany them and should not be engaged in them,” and then quoted Ayatollah Khomeini, who had famously proclaimed that, “victorious Guards Corps do not enter the political line.”⁵² It was no coincidence that Rouhani discussed Syria in the same speech. Khamenei supported Rouhani's position, telling the IRGC that Iran needed to exercise “heroic flexibility” in foreign policy in a speech interpreted by observers as a warning that the guards should not get in Rouhani's way.⁵³ Rouhani's approach to the IRGC was also outlined in an article written by Foreign Minister Zarif in *Foreign Affairs*. Zarif articulated that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would serve “as the central organ for planning and executing Iran's foreign policy.”⁵⁴ However, in hindsight, it may have been wishful thinking to believe that the foreign ministry could usurp foreign policymaking power from the IRGC in its critical area of interest.⁵⁵

As discussed above, Rouhani was able to make some inroads in Iran's Syria portfolio in the first six months of his term. However,

this changed significantly after the UN Secretary General's last minute decision to withdraw Iran's invitation to the January 2014 Geneva II peace talks. Rouhani had staked much of his credibility on the success of the talks; Iran's rebuke was a source of considerable embarrassment. The ever-powerful IRGC seized this opportunity to reconfigure Iran's Syria policy. *Kayhan* proclaimed that "the Geneva conference failed before it began," while *Javan* accused the UN of working for the United States.⁵⁶ The IRGC-linked *Raja News* slammed the UN General Secretary for being a liar, while an "expert opinion" in *Javan* argued that the withdrawal of the invitation was aimed at preventing "disgrace for the terrorists and their supporters."⁵⁷ This domestic turmoil prompted Rouhani himself to publically distance himself from Geneva II, instead attending the high profile World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos. In his post-Davos interview with the *Islamic Republic News Agency* Rouhani said:

I delivered a speech at the Davos meeting and held three or four interviews with the Swiss TV, CNN and Euronews. The news from Davos and in general the Davos forum overshadowed the Geneva II conference . . . I told the heads of some European countries that the first step to resolve the Syrian problem is that everyone should decide to counter terrorism and expel the terrorists from Syria . . . I do not think that the issue of Syria will be resolved in such meetings.⁵⁸

Rouhani needed to save face and recover from the humiliation of Geneva II, so his speech contained a major shift in his language. Not only did Rouhani seek to discredit the Geneva II talks, he also defined terrorism as the number one problem in Syria. This was inconsistent with every comment that he had made prior to this point, although was notably close to the official Syrian, Russian, and hardline Iranian discourse on the war. Rouhani was conscious of the momentum that his opponents had gained by criticizing his government for showing weakness in the international arena. The scale of Rouhani's post-Geneva II domestic problems became clear a month later when hardliners running the *Islamic Republic of Iran* broadcasting network blocked Rouhani from delivering a live address to the nation for an hour.⁵⁹ Criticism of Rouhani's approach also became more assertive in the Conservative press, with Mohammad Immami writing in *Kayhan* that "there have been more threats against Iran (by the United States) in the last six months than in the last six years."⁶⁰

February 2014 Onward

Geneva II became a watershed moment in Iran's foreign policy toward Syria, prompting a quick reversion to the original strategy of backing Assad at almost any cost. In fact, while Rouhani appeared to be exercising some foreign policy agency during the first six months of his term, the IRGC's influence soared after the January 2014 Geneva II experience, sidelining Rouhani's efforts at moderating Iran's position on Syria. Within weeks of the meeting, reports emerged that Iran had significantly increased military support for Syria. According to Iranian sources, Iran deployed hundreds more military specialists from the Quds force to enhance Assad's intelligence gathering capabilities and train more Syrian troops.⁶¹ Although Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister, Amir Abdullahian, denied allegations of the surge, Iranian officials close to the IRGC confirmed that Iranian forces were playing an enhanced role in Syria.⁶² *Fars News* also reported that the IRGC's Aeronautics Commander, Amir Ali Hajizadeh, claimed that Iran had begun exporting weapons manufacturing technology to Syria.⁶³ Iran's commitment to Syria was presented in terms of the need to fight terrorism. This approach was seemingly exonerated by the rapid rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its territorial gains in 2014. Suddenly the tough measures used to defend the Assad regime in Syria appeared perfectly justifiable in Iran.⁶⁴ Indeed, while Iran had temporarily diverted its Shi'a militias to Iraq in 2014 to counter ISIS, by 2015 they were being expanded and redeployed in Syria across new provinces with greater responsibilities.⁶⁵

Iran's increased military engagement in Syria continued throughout 2014. IRGC Brigadier General Hossein Hamedani argued on the IRGC-linked *Sepah* website in May 2014 that Assad was "fighting this war [in Syria] as our deputy," suggesting that Iran was now playing a leading role in the conflict.⁶⁶ Although the article was later removed, the comments were also picked up by *BBC Persian*. General Hamedani also purportedly claimed that the IRGC had a force of 130,000 troops on standby in Iran, ready to intervene in Syria if necessary.⁶⁷ Syrian opposition sources reported in November 2014 that Iran was establishing a combined militia of Iraqi, Lebanese, and Afghan Shi'ites under the name of the "National Ideological Resistance."⁶⁸ A Jordanian Major General, Fayez al-Doueiri, claimed that the force would be led by General Soleimani because the IRGC no longer considered Assad's army to be effective.⁶⁹ It is worth noting

that the IRGC's assertiveness likely had Khamenei's quiet support, even though the Supreme Leader continued to publicly express support for the still-popular Rouhani. Indeed, after the 2009 protests, Khamenei was only too aware of the perils of appearing to overtly ignore the public.

The humiliation of Geneva II, the continued pressure from the hardliners in the regime and the rapid rise of ISIS seriously limited Rouhani's options. By early 2014, the line advocated by the IRGC was effectively the only policy perspective available for Rouhani's government. This approach articulated Iran's commitment to Syria as a strategic and revolutionary response to "*Takfiri*" terrorists and Israel's plans to weaken the "axis of resistance."⁷⁰ This line was emphasized by President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif when hosting Syrian dignitaries in 2014. Following a meeting with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Mu'alem in Tehran, Zarif announced Iran's resolute solidarity with the Syrian regime. Zarif confirmed that Iran would stand by the Syrian government and its people because "Takfiri" groups were common enemies of Iran and Syria.⁷¹ Likewise, Rouhani announced following his meeting with the Syrian Prime Minister Wael al-Halqi:

The Syrian government and nation have been able to resist well against plots and the war. . . . Today, the international public opinion is aware of this fact that the Syrian nation and army are fighting against terrorist groups and foreign plots.⁷²

Rouhani took these comments further in June 2015, pledging that "the Iranian nation and government will remain at the side of the Syrian nation and government until the end of the road."⁷³ That same month, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, estimated that Iran was now spending \$6 billion a year on propping up Assad, although Heydemann argues that this figure excludes Iran's spending on the operations of Hezbollah and other militias in Syria, meaning that the total could be closer to \$15 or \$20 billion per year.⁷⁴

Indeed, it appeared that by mid-2014, the IRGC's approach to Syria dominated Iran's foreign policy practice and language, with the country's political elite entirely supplanted on Syrian matters. When the US Secretary of State John Kerry attempted to discuss Syria with Foreign Minister Zarif at the Munich Security Conference in February 2014, Zarif told Kerry that he did not control Iran's Syria portfolio.⁷⁵ This was a blunt admission that the Supreme Leader and the

IRGC were in charge of the Iran's foreign policy toward Syria, instead of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and President Rouhani. By 2015, Iran's carefully calibrated policy of ambiguity on Syria was no longer present. Leaving no room for doubt, General Soleimani bombastically proclaimed that, "We are witnessing the export of the Islamic revolution throughout the region . . . From Bahrain and Iraq to Syria, Yemen and North Africa."⁷⁶ Zarif, apparently finally on the same page as Soleimani, told a German newspaper in May 2015 that, "We are supporting the legitimate government of Syria. If we had not provided that support, you would have had Daesh sitting in Damascus now."⁷⁷

Conclusion

President Rouhani came to office during a difficult time. Iran's economy was shrinking under international sanctions, which seriously undermined the regime's ability to govern. Iran's neighborhood was in flames, with the scourge of sectarianism threatening to destabilize the entire region. Syria, Iran's long-time ally, was embroiled in a protracted civil war—with the growing involvement of neighboring states. There was a chance that Iran would lose its most reliable ally in the Middle East. President Rouhani's approach to the Middle East was formed in this context, through the mediation of the international and the regional. Rouhani was initially able to keep his critics at bay, even managing to secure the Supreme Leader's public endorsement to calm the hawks in the IRGC. The concept of "heroic flexibility" bought Rouhani time, and in the first six months of his presidential term, Rouhani attempted to engage in international dialogue and advocate for a peaceful solution in Syria, a position that threatened to undermine the IRGC. Syria's historic chemical weapons agreement was one of Rouhani's significant achievements in this period. However, while Rouhani had a clear agenda for Syria, his setback at Geneva II emboldened the IRGC, enabling them to effectively recalibrate Iran's Syria policy by increasing military support and sideline Iran's political leaders.

Perhaps the greatest lesson of Rouhani's foreign policy toward Syria has been the serious limits of presidential power. Although Rouhani had a clear conception of his goals in the Iran–Syria relationship, the IRGC has undermined him at almost every turn. In the end, Iran's strategic assessment of the conflict and its military commitment to preserving the Assad regime in Syria proved to be the deciding factor,

and the IRGC retained its decisive influence over Iran's foreign policy toward Syria. By 2015, it was clear through Iran's behavior and language that its Syria foreign policy was being steered not by its political leaders, but by the IRGC. Indeed, Rouhani had been completely sidelined in Iran's foreign policy toward Syria.

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CHAPTER 9

Bonyads as Agents and Vehicles of the Islamic Republic's Soft Power

William Bullock Jenkins

The Islamic Republic of Iran has continued to pursue a coordinated soft-power strategy throughout its sphere of influence, using political, economic, and military tools to promote its agenda.¹

The Islamic Republic of Iran's regional influence is an enduring and increasingly important factor in Middle Eastern geopolitics. Yet, while Iran's hard power capabilities are well documented, its exercise of soft power has received less attention, even though it is an equally—if not more—important axis of Iran's regional roles. Soft power has taken center-stage in the rhetorical lexicon of Iran's politicians, academics, and policymakers as *qodrat-e narm*. Iranian policymakers now regard soft power as fundamental to Iran's foreign policy. Iran's President, Hassan Rouhani, stated in his 2013 presidential campaign that “Iran needs soft power.”²

Soft power—that is, co-optive, attractive power—has been a feature of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy agenda since before the Iranian Revolution.³ While discussions of soft power are emerging in the Iran-focused literature, routine emphasis on macro-level, systemic analysis elides important aspects of Iranian soft power. Little attention has been paid to disentangling the determinants, resources, and vehicles of the Islamic Republic of Iran's soft power as part of its foreign policy agenda. Nonstate and parastatal actors are essential components of

soft power, both in theory and in practice. Iran's vast array of nonstate and parastatal foundations, the *bonyads*, are diverse agents of Iranian soft power with significant bearing on the conduct of Iran's foreign policy in the past and into the Rouhani era.⁴ The *bonyads*' wide range of interests and activities in commerce, philanthropy, cultural and ideological promotion, and media make them potent generators of soft power for the Islamic Republic.

This chapter demonstrates how the *bonyads* act as effective agents and vehicles of Iranian soft power and regional influence over three sections. First, it outlines features that shape the *bonyads*, their emergence as quintessential institutions of the Islamic Republic and the components of Iran's soft power. Secondly, it considers *bonyad* transnational activities to provide an insight into the breadth and significance of the *bonyads*' past and present roles in Iranian soft power. Finally, it addresses the implications of the Islamic Republic's historical ambitions to lead a regional Islamic subsystem and how *bonyads*' soft power roles support this in Rouhani's era. It is argued that the *bonyads* are effective vehicles for Iranian soft power in the Middle East and further afield due to their long-term cultivation of grassroots networks and sustained propagation of core Islamic Revolutionary precepts, regardless of the administration of the day. As effective instruments of the Islamic Republic's long-term foreign policy agenda, they are a source of continuity deep within the Iranian state and have far-ranging implications for the future of the region in the Rouhani era and beyond.

Bonyads: Quintessential Institutions of the Islamic Republic

The *bonyads* are significant and effective agents of Iranian soft power as they emblemize and propagate the Islamic Republic's revolutionary religious discourses and, to a lesser extent, Persian identity abroad through business, religious and secular philanthropy and media. The *bonyads*' parastatal relationship with the Iranian state both integrates them into key political networks and allows independence as distinct power centers and political-economic actors. Their access to key foreign policy decision-makers and vast political-economic resources guarantee the *bonyads*' ability to influence, as well as be instrumentalized for, Iranian foreign policy agendas. The *bonyads* inherited semi-independence from the state and from the *vagf* system in the

Pahlavi era. Pre-Revolution *Bonyads* were “conceived by the shah as vehicles for political, personal, or cultural goals.”⁵ Today, the most important institutions include *Bonyad-e Mosta'zafin va Janbazan* (Foundation for the Oppressed and Disabled), *Bonyad-e Shahid va Isargaran* (Martyr's and Veterans' Foundation), *Astan-e Qods-e Razavi*, *Komiteh-ye Emdad-e Emam Khomeini* (Imam Khomeini Relief Committee), *Sazeman-e Tablighat-e Eslami* (Islamic Propagation Organization), *Bonyad-e Panzdah-e Khordad* (15 Khordad Foundation). These institutions' primary alignment with revolutionary tendencies and “nonrepublican” institutions indicates how their power and soft power value remains largely outside the scope of the Rouhani administration's policy changes. In short, they are a robust foreign policy tool that effectively cultivates influence in service of Iran's revolutionary and cultural identity and are a long-term source of continuity in Iranian foreign policy outside changing administrations' regional policies.

Bonyads promote Iran's culture and ideology and provide targeted social welfare, often alongside philanthropic and commercial activities as domestic and transnational charitable foundations. For example, the Farabi Foundation promotes Iranian cinema, *Bonyad-e Sa'adi* supports Persian language and literature, *Bonyad-e Panzdah-e Khordad* commemorates revolutionary struggles, and others are religiously focused such as *Majma'-e Jahani-ye Taqrib Beyn-e Mazaheb-e Eslami* (Global Society for Reconciliation between Islamic Schools). The *Sazeman-e Tablighat-e Eslami* (Islamic Propagation Organization—IPO) and *Bonyad-e Resalat* are “powerful vehicles for disseminating Islamic ideology and energetic partisans” for “fulfilling the revolutionary mandate to promote a more just society [for the oppressed]”—a mandate with broad soft power appeal for Iran.⁶

Contemporary *bonyads* are ideological and institutional products of the Islamic Revolution, having expanded to become economic powerhouses in their philanthropic and ideological mandates. *Bonyad-e Mosta'zafin*, for instance, is crucial to the social welfare system in the Islamic Republic with an ideological mandate to support the “oppressed” (*mosta'zafin*). The *bonyads*' soft power value derives from their revolutionary origins, identity, and ideological and cultural mandates as emblems “of the redistributive and idealized character of the Islamic revolution . . . [combining] traditional religious imagery and modern organizational forms in a populist, class-rooted appeal.”⁷

Beyond philanthropic and political missions, *bonyads* are massive economic conglomerates that receive economic and financial

exemptions, have ambiguous accountability to the Iranian state and active operations across trade, commerce, manufacturing, and industrial production as well as promotion of religious-political promotion, social services and art.⁸ Formerly receiving close to 58 percent of state budgets, *bonyads* account for between 30 and 40 percent of the Iranian economy.⁹ Importantly as parastatal foundations, the *bonyads* “do business in a completely uncontrolled manner, largely outside the country.”¹⁰ Their extensive transnational commercial, philanthropic, and promotional activities mean they have “profound implications . . . for the tenor and conduct of regional relations,” especially in soft power.¹¹

Soft Power Theory: For Iran?

Soft power is “co-optive” in contrast to “coercive” (predominantly military or economic) hard power. It is “the ability of a country to structure a situation so that other countries [or communities] develop preferences or define their interests in ways consistent with its own through cultural or ideological attraction, institutions, and transnational corporations.”¹² Moreover, soft power is built “with intangible assets such as . . . culture, political values and institutions, and policies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority.”¹³

Soft power is generated from various sources. It is the method and object of employing that power (either cooptation and attraction or coercion) that distinguishes the soft and hard faces of power. Economic and even military resources, regarded as typically hard, can elicit soft power as countries or communities “may be attracted to others with command power by myths of invincibility.”¹⁴ In this way, the *bonyads*’ involvement with and support of Iranian hard power activities such as the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Hezbollah, Hamas, and other groups, also contribute to Iran’s strategy of “soft war” to counteract Western influence.¹⁵ These groups, which the *bonyads* help support, possess great popularity for regional communities—often across essentialized sectarian lines—and are a major component of Iranian soft power.¹⁶

But how can the Islamic Republic of Iran, often portrayed as an international pariah, be attractive when it is so maligned internationally? Precisely because soft power is contextually based, culturally relative, and descriptive, not normative; attractiveness lies in the eye of the beholder. The average Lebanese, Chechen, or Tajik will have

a much friendlier view of *bonyad*-funded infrastructure in Hezbollah-held south Beirut or Quranic exhibitions in Grozny than a US citizen hearing of the same project. As intangible attraction, soft power is socially constructed and its effectiveness depends on context and the relative estimation of cultural attraction, values, institutions and legitimacy or moral authority. Moreover, co-optive soft power attraction is long-term and “has a diffuse effect, creating general influence rather than producing an easily observable specific action.”¹⁷ This presents distinct limits for studies of soft power. However, the very real attraction to the *bonyads*' missions over a long period elucidates Iran's soft power appeal even amongst the opacity of Iran's regional influence.

Nonstate and parastatal actors are particularly effective generators of soft power.¹⁸ *Bonyads* independently communicate cultural and political ideas outside the state. This is important because authoritarian states face particular difficulty projecting soft power in a liberal world order. Iran exhibits authoritarian characteristics but is in fact a hybrid regime containing both democratic republican and authoritarian features deeply rooted in the particular Iranian polity.¹⁹ The parastatal nature of the *bonyads* allows them to alternately associate with or dissociate from aspects of the Iranian state's policy of the day for expedience with particular soft power effect. In short, the *bonyads*' parastatal independence, both associated with the state and fiercely independent of it, enhances their soft power usefulness. What repels in Washington may attract in Dushanbe or Beirut. One example of this is the emphasis of *bonyad* activity on Persian nationalism in welfare, philanthropic, and economic projects in Tajikistan, rather than the—often sectarian—Islamic religiosity effectually employed in Iraq and Lebanon. For instance, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC), or *Komiteh-ye Emdad*, leverages pan-Iranism in Western Tajikistan amongst ethnically related Persian Tajiks, despite their Sunni bent, while their involvement with Ismaili Shi'is in the East is minimal.²⁰ Nonstate and parastatal actors function flexibly to propagate political and cultural agendas according to context. This is what makes *bonyads* particularly effective agents and vehicles of Iranian soft power.

Resistance and Protection of Oppressed as Soft Power

The Islamic Republic's ideological stances are propagated by the *bonyads* as a core part of their mandates. A definitional trope of Iran's foreign policy and soft power is its appeal in leading an

Islamic “resistance” often beyond community and sectarian identities. The Islamic Republic’s “resistance” is anti-imperialist, anti-American, and anti-Zionist.²¹ Iran’s anti-American and anti-Zionist “resistance” discourse is materially and ideationally supported by the *bonyads*. Anti-Americanism is recognized as an increasingly salient soft power resource.²² Iran’s anti-Zionist stance is another enduring ideological factor in its regional soft power.²³ Hezbollah’s, and by association Iran’s, success in the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel War “added to the aura of Shia power.”²⁴ The *bonyads* provide direct and enduring support to Lebanon’s Hezbollah as well as indirectly through the IRGC. *Bonyad-e Shahid*’s support for the establishment of a seminary by Hezbollah’s first leader for Lebanese clerics expelled from Iraq’s Shi’ite holy sites and seminaries provided impetus for Hezbollah’s establishment.²⁵

The Islamic Republic of Iran attracts regional populations through its unique brand of pan-Islamist, revolutionary ideology. This attractive power was most fervently pursued as “export of revolution” following the Revolution to serve the dual ideological discourses of “resistance” and “protection of the oppressed.” While Khomeini’s vision of a string of revolutions and Islamic Republics legitimizing the Iranian model was not achieved, “export of the revolution” was not singularly a hard power project.²⁶ Iranian export of revolution from the first was not a hard concept “à la Napoleon” but a “more complex [set of] ‘linkage processes’—penetrative, reactive, and emulative—all at work” to galvanize support for the Islamic Republic’s political project.²⁷ Khomeini himself and others insisted that “export of revolution” was at least equally intended as a “soft” export by culture and attraction.²⁸ The *bonyads*’ long-term, quintessential identification and propagation of these discourses is essential to their contribution to Iran’s soft power.

Iranian Soft Power

While a pragmatic approach to foreign policy has become dominant in formal, “republican” state institutions including under Rouhani, “the Shi’i ideological doctrine . . . prevail[s] among some elements of the Iranian political elite,” particularly religious supervisory bodies and *bonyads*, and continues as a defining narrative of Iranian foreign policy.²⁹ Significantly, the political actors with most sway over foreign policy and regional strategy—the Supreme Leader and the IRGC in particular—and their surrounding networks, including the *bonyads*,

most fervently identify with and pursue the ideological emphases of “resistance” and “export of revolution” even when out-of-sync with the current administration’s rhetorical emphases. The active propagation of this ideology internationally is a “major function” of the *bonyads* and central axis of Iran’s soft power.³⁰

Iran’s *sanad-e cheshm-andaz-e bist saleh*, or “Twenty-year Vision Document” is a wide-ranging policy blueprint of Iranian strategy. It lays out a strategy for soft power and hard power coordination to achieve regional leadership.³¹ The document envisions Iran as an economic, scientific, and technological regional leader with an “Islamic revolutionary identity, inspirational [*elham-bakhsh*] in international relations . . . and emphasis on soft-measure action [in achieving this].”³² *Elham-bakhshi* (granting inspiration) is a term explicitly developed as a “more humanistic concept than soft power”—an indication of the centrality of soft power, albeit in deliberately different words, to Iran’s long-term strategy.³³

As a vast and diverse sector in Iran’s economy, the *bonyads* form a core part of this strategy in the economic and technological spheres as much as in the central ideational components of the document that include: “strengthening of Islamic-Iranian identity,” “deepening the spirit of knowing the enemy [‘resistance’],” and promoting “political, cultural, and economic achievements and experiences of the Islamic Republic and a rich understanding of Persian culture, art, and civilization and religious democracy.”³⁴ In each of these areas with soft power salience, *bonyads* play a central role.³⁵ *Bonyads* are exceptional soft power tools as flexible commercial conglomerates with immense economic resources and philanthropic, religiously motivated actors representing the Islamic Republic’s political identity.

Asghar Eftekhary, a researcher at Tehran’s policy-oriented Imam Sadeq University, outlines Iran’s particular view of soft power.³⁶ It rests on three precepts: “community [assistance],” “homogeneity,” and “government responsibility.” The first precept, “community assistance” (*ham-yari*) relates to the philanthropic work of religious organizations and *bonyads* as tools of Iranian state-sponsored philanthropy and charity. The second, “homogeneity” (*ham-geni*) relates to the importance of focusing on ideationally receptive, “alike” communities that identify with Iran, such as Shi’ite communities accessible through traditional transnational networks. The third, “government responsibility” (*mas’uliyat-paziri-ye dowlat*), highlights the Iranian view that the state must ultimately coordinate soft power. These three categories

constitute the strengths of Iranian foreign policy and by extension the tools, including *bonyads*, available for soft power actualization.

Bonyads also exert direct influence over foreign policy through their role as media, economic pressure groups, and “religious-cultural centers and institutions.”³⁷ While specific manifestations of these processes are hidden, it is clear that the *bonyads* influence both domestic and foreign policy as part of the “inner circle,” the discourse elite, and as central political-economic actors in Iran’s factionalism.³⁸ The *bonyads’* influence in this area, again, continues: Rouhani’s Defense Minister, Hossein Dehghan, is a former head of *Bonyad-e Shahid*.

Bonyads as Agents and Vehicles of Iranian Soft Power

Bonyads have had an international orientation and extensive transnational operations across business, commerce, and ideological missions as a mandate since establishment. The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ (MFA) official Foreign Policy Anthology indicates *Bonyad-e Shahid’s* international orientation in “the creation of the international office of *Bonyad-e Shahid*, bound for the states of Libya, Algeria, Syria, and Lebanon: ‘*Bonyad-e Shahid* assumes responsibility for the entirety of Islam’s martyrs, all around the world.’”³⁹ Similarly, *Bonyad-e Mosta’zafin* pursues extensive commercial and ideological ventures to contribute to soft power. Following the 1995 *bonyad* corruption controversy, *Mosta’zafin* increasingly pursued overseas and international business as a “strategic goal.”⁴⁰ Its commercial activities include negotiating and completing investments in infrastructure in Bosnia, Pakistan, Armenia, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, China, India, Bangladesh, and the United Arab Emirates, manufacturing in various African and South American states and elsewhere, and tourism to and from Iran.⁴¹ Other *bonyads* with explicitly cultural and religious mandates, *Astan-e Qods-e Razavi* prime amongst them, run seminaries in Qom and Mashhad and scholarship schemes to Iran for both secular and religious education. *Bonyad-e Farabi* promotes Iranian cinema both domestically and internationally.

As parastatal actors, *bonyads* provide soft power capability to serve Iranian foreign policy interests in a way that other Iranian actors, particularly the state, cannot. In an interview, Anoushirvan Ehteshami pointed to the fact that the *bonyads* were the first Iranian organizations to “set up shop” in Iraq following the 2003 US invasion.⁴² Ali Ansari supported this point further saying that “the *bonyads* filled the gap

in Iraq, and were followed by the IRGC, after the American invasion with the Americans and Anglos [*sic*] tacitly allowing that expansion of Iranian influence.”⁴³ Ansari suggests that this was, firstly, a result of their close working relationship with the IRGC and Supreme Leader and secondly, a result of their existing networks in Iraq through traditional Shi’ite transnational connections. Presumably, given the tense security situation, the *bonyads*’ entrance to Iraq was less direct than IRGC or state activity in counteracting Anglo-American efforts and therefore a lower priority for Western forces. Thus, *bonyads* provided a useful soft power vector into post-invasion Iraq to serve Iran’s foreign policy agendas in a way that other actors could not.

In Afghanistan too, *bonyads* are key generators of Iranian soft power. As Iraq and Afghanistan policy are the IRGC and Supreme Leader’s—rather than the MFA’s—preserve, the *bonyads*’ primary alignment with these actors is a particular enabler. Andreas Wilde suggests that Iran’s soft power and foreign policy in Afghanistan is shaped by “a variety of actors within Iran . . . and some of them like the *pas-daran* [IRGC] and the religious foundations, the *bonyads*, have their own agendas and often seek to sideline the government.”⁴⁴ The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee has been as “the most prominent among several Iranian state-sponsored organizations operating in Afghanistan . . . [which] advance Tehran’s ideological and political ends in Afghanistan, promote Shi’ism, and incite anti-American sentiment.”⁴⁵ The *bonyads*’ impact in soft power is further substantiated by US counterstrategies to Iranian soft power in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2008, the United States developed a “Balancing Iranian Influence” (BII) strategy in Iraq with which “to balance Iranian soft power gains.”⁴⁶ This strategy focused on strengthening Iraqi capability to resist Iranian influence.

Bonyad Transnational Soft Power Activities

As vehicles of the Islamic Republic’s discourses, *bonyads* are instrumentalized in service of Iranian foreign policy agendas through vast transnational philanthropic, commercial, media, touristic activities, and support of popular hard power initiatives. The usefulness and utility of the *bonyads* for Iranian regional and extra-regional influence lies in their ability to effectually cultivate deep-rooted personal ties and long-term patronage networks. The *bonyads* operate in Iranian soft power “like the NGOs and international civil society of Western

countries.”⁴⁷ *Bonyads* purposefully compete with Western aid agencies for hearts and minds in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as, for instance, deliberately competing with the Lebanese government in the provision of services and aid following the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel War.⁴⁸ Importantly however, they have stronger “staying power” in soft power than Western NGOs because of their cultivation and entrenchment of long-term networks. Iran’s ideological exports are particularly effective when transmitted by *bonyads* in this manner because “ideologies and models of action are seldom propagated by a simple process of indoctrination and imitation . . . [behind them] lies a network [using] existing patterns of relationships that are historically well established.”⁴⁹ In this way, the *bonyads’* transnational soft power effectiveness is amplified by their leverage and cultivation of networks, especially integration in traditional Shi’ite networks.

As charitable, philanthropic organizations *bonyads* collect religious alms and state funding to assist the “dispossessed,” “oppressed,” martyrs, and veterans internationally, contributing to Iranian soft power. Their mandate “is to help Muslims everywhere around the world.”⁵⁰ One compelling case of *bonyad* international philanthropy is provided in the activities of *Komiteh Emdad Imam Khomeini* (IKRC), which receives funding from the Supreme Leader, and coordinates with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The IKRC collects religious alms (*zakat*, *khoms*, and *sadaqeh*) and re-distributes in Iran and abroad through a network of alms collection boxes, offices, distribution centers, and educational institutes. The *Komiteh* publishes statistical reports of long-term domestic and international expenditures, most recently in 2012.⁵¹ Internationally, statistics are provided for the IKRC’s activities and expenditures in both ongoing philanthropy and historical campaigns in the Balkans, Caucasus and the Middle East, including Lebanon, Syria, Chechnya, Palestine, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Iraq, Bosnia, and Kosovo. For instance, as of 2012, the IKRC maintained networks of offices (“units”) that are variously welfare, cultural, and educational centers and offices in Lebanon, Syria, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Iraq, and Comoros. These offices directly dispensed welfare to over 30,000 “assistance-seeking” households and 94,000 individuals in target communities in 2012 alone.⁵²

The IKRC has ongoing international expenditures and runs special collection campaigns to win hearts and minds following international events, particularly postconflict. In special campaigns, IKRC has (calculated at available historical exchange rates for year; periods by

mean): disbursed \$11 million in aid in Palestine between 1995 and 2011, with a special campaign in 2012 after Israel's 2012 "Returning Echo" and "Pillar of Defense" military operations in Gaza; distributed special campaign monies to "Iraqi Displaced" in 1991 (\$3.29 million) and 2003 (\$2 million) after the 1991 and 2003 Iraq Wars; provided aid to the "Displaced of Bosnia and Herzegovina" between 1992–1995 (\$2.5 million); Chechnya (\$0.8 million) and Kosovo (\$3.6 million) in 1999; as well as welfare and religious literature in newly-independent and postconflict Azerbaijan. IKRC also operates in spheres beyond direct welfare to support scholarships for the foreign "dispossessed," finance the repair of residential and other buildings, fund and organize weddings, and provide traditional no-interest Islamic *qarz ul-hasanah* micro-loans.⁵³ The IKRC is also adept at adapting to context. While in Azerbaijan, Lebanon, and Iraq they distribute sectarian literature, in Tajikistan they lay particular emphasis on brotherly Persian identity in supporting Tajiki war widows' study in Tajikistan and Iran as well as funding major infrastructure, employing local Tajiki workers.⁵⁴

Importantly the *bonyads'* accretion of soft power attraction through philanthropy, patronage and welfare, as in the IKRC case above, is not limited to direct recipients nor are the relatively small sums compared to Western aid insignificant in soft power value. To the first point, there is a reputational multiplier effect as those who observe or hear about such initiatives can be positively influenced in a similar way to recipients. The sums of money distributed in the target communities not only amount to much more in purchasing power parity, but *bonyad* philanthropy is efficiently targeted due to the low bureaucratic overheads and long-term *bonyad* networks in target communities. Both the collection and distribution of alms as explicitly religious forms of charity have soft power value due to the positive reflection on the *bonyads'* and Iran's piety.

Bonyads also franchise philanthropy and charity, arguably making it more effective. Particularly striking examples are foundations run by and associated with Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁵⁵ The Islamic Charitable Emdad Committee (ICEC) was created by the *Komiteh Emdad* and its ubiquitous alms-collection boxes associate their philanthropy with Khomeini and the Islamic Republic via the same logo.⁵⁶ The Martyr's Association was established in 1982 in Lebanon by *Bonyad-e Shahid* and "operates as a sister organization to [the] Iranian organization of the same name, as does the Association for the Wounded [to *Bonyad-e Mosta'zafin*]." ⁵⁷ In Pakistan too, a *Bonyad-e Shahid* affiliate

runs the Imam Khomeini Complex for welfare and education, and other *bonyads* conduct welfare and educational work.⁵⁸ According to the Lebanese historian Nassif Hitti, the effect of the networks cultivated by these *bonyad*-affiliates is to affirm “total identification with Iran” and its ideological projects.⁵⁹

Bonyad avenues of cultivating and supporting Iranian soft power influence extend beyond philanthropy, patronage, and welfare to publications and media. These are core *bonyad* activities that propagate Iran’s ideological discourses and complement and align with state-owned media and the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy agendas. Major Iranian news sources owned and operated by *bonyads* include the *Mehr News Agency* and the English-language *Tehran Times*; the latter established as “a loud voice of the Islamic Revolution and the loudspeaker of the oppressed people of the world.”⁶⁰ The Farabi Foundation and *Bonyad-e Mosta’zafin* are collaborating on a film about the life of the Prophet Mohammad.⁶¹ A Shi’ite perspective on the Prophet will potentially be controversial, but nonetheless operates as soft power by framing an agenda, whether negatively or positively received in different communities.

The *bonyads* are also involved in public and cultural diplomacy. An example is the Organization for Culture and Islamic Relations’ instrumental role in arranging and formalizing a wide series of “cultural, scientific, and educational exchanges” between Iran and Sudan and Iran and Pakistan.⁶² *Bonyad* facilities have been used extensively for cultural diplomacy, with triumphs according to Mohsen Rafiqdust, former head of *Bonyad-e Mosta’zafin*.⁶³

Bonyad public and cultural diplomacy and media also has a darker side. During Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani’s and Mohammad Khatami’s presidencies (1989–1997; 1997–2005), Khomeini’s *fatwa* for the assassination of Salman Rushdie was progressively disowned by the government as part of the move to a more pragmatic foreign policy. However, following this reversal, the 15 Khordad Foundation announced an increase in the reward for Rushdie’s assassination, contravening Iranian state policy.⁶⁴ This was again seen following the 2005 *Jyllands-Posten* Mohammad cartoons controversy, with the Foundation increasing the bounty on Salman Rushdie by another US\$500,000 dollars to a total of US\$3.3 million.⁶⁵ At the same time, the government could distance itself from the 15 Khordad Foundation claiming that it was a nonpublic entity, while not disavowing or rescinding the upped reward and associated reputational boost.⁶⁶

Ehteshami notes that “one is struck by the ease with which the Rushdie affair was used for the reinforcement of the regime’s Islamic revolutionary and rejectionist credentials”—even when in conflict with official state policy.⁶⁷ The Rushdie Affair demonstrates the *bonyads*’ role and leverage over Iranian soft power as actors independent from the government. They often promote an agenda that reflects the Revolution’s radical ideological discourses that resonates with particular regional communities, even in opposition to the more pragmatic tendencies of state policy such as under the Moderate Rouhani administration.

The *bonyads* also fund and organize extensive touristic, pilgrimage, and educational programs and institutions instrumental to Iranian soft power. Much of Iran’s tourism infrastructure is run by *bonyads*.⁶⁸ Pilgrimage and religious tourism as much as secular tourism is a major area of *bonyad* contribution to soft power that reflects well on their religiosity and lends legitimacy to Iranian agendas. The flow of pilgrims between Iran and Iraq is enabled by *bonyads* as “a conduit of ideas, investments, and broader social and cultural ties.”⁶⁹ Among the almost 50,000 seminarians brought to Qom and Mashhad to study (not all Shi’a), many are supported financially and in-kind by *bonyads*. These same seminaries and institutions fund and disseminate major promotional publications globally in multiple languages. The MFA Anthology relates numerous visits of Lebanese martyrs’ families supported by *Bonyad-e Shahid*—a practice that continues today.⁷⁰ The Lebanese Martyrs Foundation runs the “*Shahid*” (Witness) school system, which propagates Iran’s ideology and (with limited success) instructs Persian language. It is “one of the most visible of the transnational Shi’ite networks that now operate between Iran and Lebanon.”⁷¹

Bonyads and Hard Power in Promoting Iranian Soft Power

The *bonyads* also support Iranian hard power initiatives with soft power value. These include supporting Iranian paramilitary proxies such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Iraqi, and Afghan groups that enjoy popularity and also support sanction circumvention, which contributes to the salience of “resistance.” The *bonyads*’ activity and contribution to Iranian soft power in each of these spheres (somewhat counterintuitively) revolve around the fact that attractive soft power can equally be propagated by “command power [spread] by myths of invincibility” and that “economic resources can . . . attract as well as coerce.”⁷²

Iranian support of organizations (paramilitary or not) around the region and its ability to survive an intensive and extensive sanctions regime adds to its “resistance” credentials.

The quantity and quality of the *bonyads*’ support of Iranian hard power is difficult to precisely substantiate, but insight can be garnered. *Bonyad-e Mosta’zafin* businesses in mining and chemical production and other sectors have been used to both camouflage and acquire inputs for IRGC weaponry manufacturing and defense industries.⁷³ Allegations of illicit weaponry procurement by *Mosta’zafin* have been sustained.⁷⁴ Iran’s provision of material resources, patronage, and political support to Hezbollah, including through *bonyads*, has been instrumental in that organization’s popular rise and markedly fed Iran’s reputation.⁷⁵

The *bonyads* play a key role in circumventing sanctions by stockpiling foreign exchange assets in holding companies and sourcing machinery and other products through subsidiary companies.⁷⁶ Their utility in helping the Iranian state circumvent sanctions, explicitly propagated as part of Iran’s “resistance” discourse in recent years, is one example of this.⁷⁷ Thus, *bonyad* resources are focused to support and drive Iran’s strategy and pursuit of regional influence; even coercive initiatives can have soft power value for this purpose.

Bonyad transnational activities provide a wide array of vehicles for Iranian soft power influence and ideological agendas regionally and extra-regionally. Their secular and religious activities range across media, tourism, commerce, public and other diplomacy, and even support for popular hard power initiatives salient to Iranian soft power due to their identification with and active propagation of the Islamic Republic’s ideology. In the end, however, the *bonyads*’ cultivation of networks as parastatal actors that emblemize the Revolution’s ideological values distinct from the administration of the day and the state itself is their main strength in generating Iranian soft power. As pointed out in an interview: “The *bonyads* are first-rate [*fowq ul-adeh*] vehicles of influence precisely because they are unconstrained and have an open hand both attached to and separated from the state.”⁷⁸

Bonyads and Rouhani’s Foreign Policy

President Hassan Rouhani came to power in 2013 amid high expectations of foreign policy change. This quickly manifested in an improvement of relations with the US and the November 2013 interim nuclear

deal, but has had minimal impact on the *bonyads*. The *bonyads* operate beyond formal centers of political power in Iran and are most closely linked to conservative factions, which resist influence from formal state organs and moderate and reformist policy changes. As a result, the *bonyads* continue their work largely uninterrupted, even despite attempts by Rouhani to subject them to standard taxation and accountability mechanisms.⁷⁹

Dissecting the *bonyads'* continued key role in the manifestation of the Islamic Revolution's popular religiopolitical ideology transnationally provides new insight into the mechanisms of Iranian soft power at a time when Rouhani's administration is intent on changing the reputation of Iran's influence regionally and globally. The *bonyads'* independence and pursuit of agendas different from the state allows them to flexibly project soft power in ways the Iranian state cannot. *Bonyads* champion the Islamic Republic's long-term ideological discourses as components of deep-rooted and coordinated Iranian strategy and foreign policy to bolster Iranian regional soft power. Their political-economic resources, bifurcated connection to and independence from the state as parastatal actors, as well as their quintessential identification and propagation of Iranian revolutionary discourses, make them significant agents and vehicles of Iranian soft power in their extensive transnational activities. Importantly, this is an enduring area of activity in Iranian soft power that pays dividends for the Islamic Republic's regional influence outside the more high-profile (particularly in the West) foreign policy changes taking place since Rouhani's 2013 election.

Particularly working in concert with the IRGC and the Supreme Leader—the real arbiters of Iranian foreign policy—the *bonyads* are instrumentalized to cultivate Iranian influence abroad as moving parts within a greater Iranian regional strategy. This is particularly true of *bonyad* involvement in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, where foreign policy is primarily the preserve of the IRGC rather than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or officials of elected “republican” institutions, such as the MFA. Here, the *bonyads* play a role in supporting the IRGC, Hamas, and Hezbollah (among other groups) that enjoy particular popularity—as demonstrated in Iran's conspicuous involvement in the anti-Islamic State campaign in Iraq and support of Houthi co-religionists in Yemen.⁸⁰

The *bonyads'* philanthropic and commercial activities outside Iran and their contribution to Iranian soft power raise further questions

not only about the *bonyads*, but also Iranian soft power and regional influence more generally. Since President Rouhani's 2013 election, the Iranian state has pursued public diplomacy and other contemporary soft power initiatives through avenues including social media, television, and other broadcasts as a coordinated soft power strategy more than any time since the advent of the Islamic Republic. Some aspects of this bolster Iran's official "resistance" and "protection of the oppressed" discourses, while others are nationalist or distinctly Western-oriented "charm offensives." However, soft power emphasis on state action and particularly public diplomacy is increasingly regarded as having limited efficacy in most contexts. This also seems likely in the Iranian and Middle Eastern context as power diffuses from states, which find soft power difficult to wield, to nonstate and parastatal actors. It is here that the promotion of political values and culture in actors such as the *bonyads* becomes a key dynamic underpinning the enduring effectiveness of broader Iranian soft power strategy.

Importantly, the advent of a new public diplomacy by the "Diplomatic Sheikh" doesn't negate the utility and effectiveness of long-term soft power tools such as the *bonyads*. Instead, it is likely to act as a valuable addition in opening another front in Iran's international interactions, with specifically different target communities and political goals. The resolution of the nuclear standoff will add to Iran's standing in a liberal world order with the hopeful effect of a relative normalization of Iran-US relations. But with Iran's traditional allies and connections in the Middle East, *bonyads* will continue to operate as effective soft power agents regardless of administration change.

At the same time as Iranian soft power exhibits continuity and a new public diplomacy has opened, historical events have brought the limits of Iran's influence into focus. Some argue that Iran's influence has waned due to regional vicissitudes requiring divisive displays of hard power, sectarian allegiance, or geopolitical trade-offs. However, this goes against the core long-term nature of effective soft power: influence derives from careful cultivation of relationships and the propagation of attractive cultural, political, and moral values. The *bonyads* will continue to excel in this sphere as significant vehicles of Iranian soft power and religiopolitical identity with relevance to some regional communities.

In the end, thorough understanding of Iranian regional influence will help to disentangle Iran's diverse roles in the region; at once pragmatic and ideological, both hard and soft. Recent and ongoing

geopolitical tectonic shifts in the Middle East—the post-2011 Arab uprisings, the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, the Yemen insurrection, intensification of sectarian rivalry, as well as cautious optimism about relative Iran-US détente—necessitate new lines of enquiry. Understanding the *bonyads*' philanthropic motivation and extensive activity in engaging regional communities with Iran's multifaceted identity, whether support of pilgrimage, secular or religious education of Tajiki Sunni widows, cover for hard power in Yemen, or *bonyad*-funded infrastructure in Pakistan and Quranic book fairs deep in the Caucasus, provides just one compelling and informative key to disentangling regional realignments and the axes of change and continuity in Iranian foreign policy. Understanding the *bonyads*' agency in Iranian regional influence provides original insight into Iranian foreign policy and soft power at a time of decisive geopolitical reconfiguration in the Middle East with Iran and its *bonyads* at the center.

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CHAPTER 10

Future Prospects

Shahram Akbarzadeh & Dara Conduit

President Rouhani came to office in August 2013 pledging to return “rationality and moderation” to Iran, telling a reformist newspaper that, “What I truly wish is for moderation to return to the country. This is my only wish. Extremism pains me greatly. We have suffered many blows as a result of extremism.”¹ Although Rouhani’s election victory endowed him with the popular mandate to change Iran’s foreign policy, Iran’s new president faced no shortage of obstacles in the first two years of his presidency. He quickly discovered both internal and external obstacles in bringing Iran out of international isolation.

By mid-2015, the Middle East was facing instability on a scale unparalleled in its recent history. The Arab Spring had failed to sow its promised seeds of pluralism and tolerance, instead leading to a cacophony of failing and authoritarian states across the region. The state structures in Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Yemen had crumbled, while Islamic State of Iraq and Syria’s (ISIS) declared caliphate undermined the Sykes–Picot borders that had defined the Middle East for nearly a century. Meanwhile, 20,000 Sunni foreign fighters had flocked to Iraq and Syria to fight against Iran’s allies in Baghdad and Damascus, and sectarian attacks took place with increasing frequency across the region.² This meant that the sectarian fire was well alight by the time Saudi Arabia amassed a Sunni-led international coalition in March 2015 to quell what it claimed was an Iran-backed rebellion in Yemen. Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif himself acknowledged the scale of this chaos in an Op-Ed in *The New York Times* in April 2015, noting that, “The wider Persian Gulf region is in turmoil. It is

not a question of governments rising and falling: the social, cultural and religious fabrics of entire countries are being torn to shreds.”³

This is not to say that that regional events completely thwarted Rouhani’s efforts at re-engagement. Rouhani enjoyed some success on the international stage during his first two years in office. This included attaining détente with President Obama and signing the nuclear agreement, both of which were remarkable achievements that enabled Rouhani to reverse some of the damage that his predecessor had inflicted upon Iran’s international reputation. However, Rouhani’s progress on normalizing relations with Iran’s neighbors has been less successful. While Afghanistan and Iraq see the benefits of mending relations with Iran, especially under the mild-mannered President Rouhani, Saudi Arabia and other Arab Sheikdoms remain wary of Iran’s regional ambitions, which continue to overshadow these relationships and impede Rouhani’s agenda. Although Iran’s vast natural reserves and trade opportunities have proven sufficient to lubricate some economic ties, political considerations have proven a major stumbling block.

Regardless, progress on the nuclear issue and the prospect of sanctions relief galvanized Rouhani’s popular mandate at home, and allowed him to keep his domestic critics at bay. Rouhani had staked much of his reputation on the success of the nuclear agreement. Unlike President Mohammad Khatami, whose promised international engagement ended the day that US President George W. Bush declared Iran a member of the “Axis of Evil,” Rouhani has been able to take advantage of a receptive President in Washington to launch direct dialogue with the United States. Although this has not been without complications given the embarrassing and unexpected withdrawal of Iran’s invitation to the Geneva II Syrian peace talks, Rouhani was able to compensate by clinching the long-awaited nuclear deal.

At times regional developments even worked to Iran’s advantage. Iran’s swift and effective response to ISIS’s declaration of a caliphate demonstrated the validity of Rouhani’s claims that Iran is a regional power, while giving the country the opportunity to showcase its indispensable—albeit mostly unwelcome—capacity as an enforcer of regional security. ISIS’s rise also brought Iran and the United States’ shared interests into sharper focus, justifying the strengthening of bilateral ties. This meant that by 2015, Iran had undoubtedly become a significant power in the Persian Gulf, even though some of its neighbors had larger military budgets.

However, despite these gains, the overall success of Rouhani's foreign policy program was significantly hampered by regional developments. Iran's burgeoning influence failed to win it friends across the region, and Rouhani's Iran was greeted with trepidation by some neighbors. Azerbaijan, for instance, was suspicious of Rouhani's overtures, concerned that the new president sought to foment cultural imperialism. Further, the cynical view of Iran as bent on destabilizing the region and expanding its influence through substate actors gained prominence in this period, particularly in the wake of Iran's support for both Shia militias and Hezbollah. In this school of thought, even the nuclear agreement—which had long been hailed as the key to regional stability in the Middle East—became perceived as a tool that would give Iran the green light for regional domination. This sentiment was evident in comments made by the former Saudi Ambassador to the US Prince Turki bin Faisal al-Saud in March 2015, who noted that,

Iran is already a disruptive player in various scenes in the Arab world, whether it's Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, or Bahrain . . . ending fear of developing weapons of mass destruction is not going to be the end of the troubles we're having with Iran.⁴

In fact, it appeared that for many of Iran's Sunni neighbors, the combination of Iran's pariah status and the international sanctions regime had helped keep Iran in its box for the past decade. With the easing of economic sanctions, Iran would be able to exercise an increasingly assertive foreign policy, as had already been seen in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. This was a major factor behind Saudi Arabia's decision to amass a Sunni coalition to repel the Houthi insurgency in Yemen. Although President Obama's meeting with GCC member states at Camp David in May 2015 seemed to assuage many of these concerns, it emerged that Saudi Arabia will increase defense spending by 27 percent by 2020 to become the world's fifth largest military spender, despite low oil prices.⁵ This implied that Saudi Arabia would not be taking any chances on Iran and that the feud between the two Gulf powers would be a defining feature of the region in the years to come.

Likewise, ISIS's rise—although providing an opportunity for Iran to flex its muscles on the regional stage—also provided an impediment to Rouhani's program of international engagement. For many of Iran's Sunni neighbors, the country's unequivocal response to the group's seizure of Fallujah and Mosul in the first half of 2014 merely exonerated their suspicion about Iran's regional ambitions. Many of

the Arab states came to view Iran's role in Iraq through the lens of the Syrian conflict, where Iran had backed the Assad regime while the rest of the Arab states backed the largely Sunni opposition. In this view, Iran now had decisive influence over another Arab capital. The Arab concern led to commentary such as a piece in *Foreign Policy* titled, "The Battle for Iraq Is a Saudi War on Iran" and prompted Gregory Gause III to proclaim that a "new Middle East cold war" was underway.⁶ Indeed, while Iran and its neighbors were technically fighting on the same side of the battle against ISIS, the group's emergence had deepened interstate and ideational rivalries, rather than highlighting shared interests.

Domestic constraints also played a role in curtailing the complete realization of Rouhani's foreign policy program. While Rouhani was able to implement foreign policy change in Iran's relationships with Armenia, Azerbaijan, the UAE, and the KRG, he had little influence over the Syria portfolio. This was because contemporary Iran-Syria ties have been characterized—almost from their moment of birth—by military considerations, meaning that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) has had a hand in the relationship for decades. Indeed, Iran's Syria relationship demonstrated that the country's factional and political system continues to influence policy-making, despite Rouhani's clear electoral mandate. In fact, Rouhani's near-paralysis in this sphere illustrated the scale of the limitations of presidential power in Iran, particularly in portfolios that fall within the interests of Ayatollah Khamenei or the IRGC. These dynamics were also clear in the behavior of the *bonyads*, which highlighted the significant foreign policy role played by extra-political Iranian organizations beyond the president's control.

By 2015, the security and diplomatic landscape of the Middle East was harsher than ever. ISIS's ascendance to quasi-state status escalated sectarian tensions across the region and presented a new challenge for President Rouhani; one that the Iranian leadership did not anticipate. Indeed, Iran's problems no longer revolved exclusively around the nuclear issue, so signing a deal and reviving Iran's economy was only part of the challenge. Although Rouhani's foreign policy had remained consistent with the goals and values that he articulated in his electoral pledges, he had only mixed success. The goalposts had shifted significantly in the first two years of his presidency.

Rouhani's challenges were exacerbated by the fact that his success in dealing with some issues inadvertently intensified others. This has already been seen in Iran's progress on the nuclear issue, which in turn

led to serious concerns in Riyadh and some other Arab capitals. Indeed, while striking a balance between competing issues and interests may be the defining challenge of foreign policymaking during the second half of Rouhani's presidential term, his administration did not appear to have a clear strategy to alleviate the concerns. As a result, Iran's ongoing response to ISIS merely boxed the country further into a sectarian corner. Even though Iran might be a reluctant sectarian power, in reality, the policy decision to back religiously alike neighbors has far-reaching regional implications that are likely to damage the Islamic Republic and constrain Rouhani's future prospects of success.

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